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EDEN PHILLPOTTS

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The Transit of the Red Dragon and other Tales

By
Eden Phillpotts
Author of
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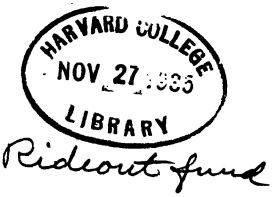

Arrowsmith's 3/6 Series.

To the

Human Boy

with hearty

regard.

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CHAPTER I.

THE NEW DOOR.

"WHEN a job's marked for the doin', us can't take off our coats an' spit 'pon our hands too soon," said Farmer Chugg.

Thus, in his forcible way, he described future intentions, but Margaret shivered at this graphic mention of detail. She was his daughter, and the old man, with great lack of judgment some people said, had given her an education above the station she occupied—an education which caused her to protest at more of his everyday expressions than one, albeit she loved every hair on his grizzled head. Money, coined from many a fat field of

Woolcrofts Farm, had gone to put a polish on Margaret Chugg's mind and manners; but her father's diction was always a source of comic grief to her. He, while quick to contrast her conversation with that of maidens less favoured by education, had no mind to change his own, and stuck to the vernacular dialect of his motherland. A Devon man was he in thought and principle—a man born and bred before Board Schools—ignorant, honest, religious, with a voice that came from his deep chest, an eye grey as the granite of Dartmoor, an accent round and rich as the red bosom of the West country.

"Ess fay! Us be called 'pon to cut through the solid stone of that gert wall; and us will. I ban't gwaine to seek help from no man. 'Tis awnly work for two picks an' two pair o' stout arms: an' if my chaps can't do that much they did ought to be 'shamed. An' when the hole 's made through, the carpenter from Horrabridge can come down-long an' build a door."

"But it isn't an ordinary wall, father. You might pierce a foot of bricks and mortar without trouble. This is a very different matter—at least four feet thick or more, Phil says."

"What do he knaw about it? His book-larnin', though a fine thing, ain't gaine to pull the wall down, anyway."

"But he does know a great deal about it, and, though I don't like Phil, as you know very well, yet it cannot be denied that his book-learning might help you. He says, for one thing, that many of the old Devon homesteads are built upon the foundations of much more ancient buildings—venerable manor houses and the like. And Phil says that he feels quite certain, from a study of the walls, that Woolcrofts is a comparatively new farmhouse built into the ruins of a fine old mansion. He is sure that the kitchen wall, where you are going to cut a new door, belongs to a time long before the rest of the house—a time when some noble gentleman's manor probably stood here."

"It may be so, or it may not. The boy's larnin' is mighty various, to be sure, but larnin' won't cut a way through a stone wall."

"You won't listen, you impatient old grizzly-bear of a father! There 's a deal more to say yet. In one of his books Phil finds that long ago, when Queen Elizabeth reigned, a noble Devon family called Strode dwelt here in the Meavy valley. They had a great house, long vanished away, which must have stood somewhere between Woolcrofts and the church."

"There be Strodes now, for the matter of that."

"But he thinks the whole family, or at any rate that branch of it, died with one Si Michael, who was killed fighting for King Charles at Torrington. The family sank down and down, and grew very poor; then Sir Michael gave his life for the failing cause. They all followed the King, whoever he was, and they all came to grief in turn, poor heroes."

Farmer Chugg sniffed; he was a stout Radical.

"This old wife's tale won't pull down the wall; an' blamed if I knaw how they fared in them days wi'out a door 'twixt kitchen an' wash-house, gentle or simple."

"You dense old dear!" said Margaret. "Of course, that wasn't a kitchen-wall in those good old times."

She pointed to the whitewashed side of the old-fashioned, low-roofed kitchen wherein their conversation took place.

"Why, it may have been draped with rare tapestry then, or hung with noble pictures, instead of your old gun and those sides of bacon. It may have been the library wall, rich with splendid shelves of books; or it may have been the side of a banquet-room and have shone with fair wax candles gleaming from great sconces of silver."

"Well, what it was don't signify to us, no more than them who built it do. Us have got to knock a hole through, Sir Michael Strode

or no Sir Michael Strode; an' the better they builded in them dead-an'-gone days, so much the more sweat for us."

"It's about the building I want to tell you. Phil says he is sure that there is a passage in the heart of this old wall."

"A passage! Now he's talking sense. If that's so our labour's halved."

"Yes, secret passages and staircases, intended as means of escape in those dangerous times, were always planned and allowed for. Even now, in ancient manors and country houses, Phil declares that you will often see strange, weird places of concealment built in behind the chimneys. Skeletons have been found in them sometimes, and all sorts of horrors."

"Well, us don't want no dead bones; but if so be there's a passage-way in the heart of this stout masonry, so much the better, for that means two foot o' stone instead of more'n four. You can tell 'Liza an' Martha to make a clean sweep to-night an' put breakfast in

the parlour to-morrow. Me an' Rob 'll shaw some of 'em what work be, auld though I am. As for Rob, why, his head's nigh thick enough to ram a hole in the wall single-handed."

Margaret flushed; her round, blue eyes grew bright, and the full sweep of her plump bosom rose and fell sharply. Her father's remark had angered her, and he saw it.

"My stars! what's this tantrum for? Can't I talk 'bout my own farm hands? Rob Basset's heart be in the right place, of course, if his head is thick. He don't come within your scope to think 'bout any way. Phil 's different. A maid might be fair proud o' him. Such larnin'! Bound to go far, he is. Knaws everything, even to the names o' the stars in the sky. An' you, educated up to piano-playin' yourself, thanks to me—you—well, best let the matter bide. I 've my 'pinions, an' them I 'll stick to, be they right or mistaken."

Peter Chugg clanked iron-shod out of his kitchen, and Margaret, smoothing her ruffled

emotions, set to work to help the preparations for mid-day dinner.

Concerning the young man of whom they spoke as "Phil," brief mention must now be made. Philip Duckworth's father, the descendant of a race of well-to-do yeomen, and the life-long friend of Farmer Chugg, had died a bankrupt under unhappy circumstances not necessary to detail here. Poverty stared his widow in the face, and the master of Woolcrofts had come forward to offer practical aid. This he did by taking young Phil off his mother's hands; and the youngster was brought up by his foster-father, given a sound education, and allowed to do as much or as little work on the farm as he pleased. Farmer Chugg thought the world of him, appeared blind to his faults, and, while a man of shrewd common-sense in most affairs, yet chose to ignore the fact that Phil was no more than a lazy young drone in the hive of Woolcrofts. The farmer foretold great things for the boy; was dazzled by his natural ability,

and failed to realise his weakness of purpose and desultory indolence. Nor did the old man realise that Phil's acquired knowledge was of a sort unlikely to advance the youngster's practical welfare. He knew some astronomy, was read in the folk-lore and history of Devon, and had a smattering of Latin and mathematics with which he astounded the country-side; but that was all. For the rest, he shirked all toil worthy the name, ate the bread of idleness, and, discovering a secret ambition at the heart of Farmer Chugg, was well content to waste his life and wait events. The hope of his foster-father may be told in a word. He pictured an alliance between Margaret and young Duckworth. Boy and maid were nearly of an age; and Farmer Chugg, though he had long made up his mind that no empty-handed suitor would ever have his daughter, yet put such faith in Phil's powers, that he was confident the boy would justify his high opinion and presently make a name and fortune for

himself. Margaret, meantime, instead of falling in love with Phil's handsome face, fine proportions, and mental endowments, had looked elsewhere, and already showed some predilection for a very different individual. Rob Basset was the son of Farmer Chugg's head man on the farm. He exceeded Phil in splendour of physique, but lacked his rare good looks and natural ability.

At dinner time the two young men arrived with the rest of the household. Phil was cool as a cucumber, a book under his arm; Rob appeared passing hot, hungry and thirsty from cutting of oats.

"You and me'll do this here bit of work come daylight, Basset," said the farmer, taking the head of his table and pointing behind him to the kitchen wall, where the outline of the future door was already marked in charcoal.

"Theer's been more'n enough talk 'bout 'un," answered Rob, with his mouth full.

Margaret stole a look at the flaxen-haired young giant and passed him the cider; the

hum of voices and the clatter of knives and forks make music to hearty appetites; and Farmer Chugg listened to Phil, who fed more daintily than his mates and explained the nature of old walls and ancient mansions.

"In the cow-yard, where that side of the kitchen abuts, you can see an old door bricked up and covered with centuries of whitewash. That door lies in the thickness of the masonry and shows conclusively there must be a passage-way through it," he explained.

"'Zactly so!" answered the farmer, triumphantly banging the handle of his knife on the table. "What could be clearer? That's the beauty of book-larnin'; it teaches a body to put two an' two together an' make four of 'em. Now I 've seed that patch o' bricks in the back-side o' the yard for a matter of forty years, yet I never grasped hold o' the real meanin' till this moment."

Everybody looked at Phil with admiration, and he looked at Margaret; but she only tossed her little head and ate a lettuce leaf.

CHAPTER II.

THE HOLE IN THE WALL.

THAT night Farmer Chugg's daughter and her maids cleared every pot and pan from the kitchen as he had directed, and in the first grey of dawn, long before even the master himself had risen, a thunder of noise shook the old house to its foundations and wakened everybody within it. The uproar told that Rob Basset had arrived from the snug tallet over the stables where he slept, and when Mr. Chugg went down to lend a hand, he found the young man at his task. The plough and bill-hook Rob knew, but he was not quite so handy with a crowbar. Immense physical strength and youthful energy atoned for lack of experience, however, and the farmer blinked approvingly, through a mist of lime that filled the air with red gold in the first glimmer of dawn.

"Lord love us! I thought you was knockin' the house down by the noise."

"Good marnin', maister. Ess, a power o' noise 'll go to this job; 'tis all big chunks o' granite once you get through the plaster."

For an hour the two men worked side by side, Rob doing what he was told, and Farmer Chugg handling a pick. Then the elder stopped to rest for a space.

"Phil Duckworth do reckon as 'tis a holler wall, so we did ought to be near half through by breakfast. There 's brains for 'e in that bwoy's head!"

Rob was six months older than his rival, and shared Farmer Chugg's admiration of the scholar. He saw, too, that Phil's eyes turned hungrily to Margaret many times in a day, and while he also found her the guiding star of his life, his humility was such that no hope of the most distant sort had yet fluttered his heart. That Margaret cherished his flaxen locks and gloried in his enormous biceps was a secret absolutely unknown to

Rob. He frankly reckoned himself a clown beside Phil, and he, like his master, had sometimes wondered why the girl showed so little apparent regard for the brilliant young gentleman always at her elbow.

"Ess," said Rob, "true for you; he's got a wonnerful power o' larnin'. He 'pears to dig it out o' printed books same as us dig turnips out of the land."

Farmer Chugg nodded and scratched his head, showing some signs of discontent as he did so.

"And her's the richer by a mighty fine education likewise—Daisy, I mean. Yet they don't cotton, seemin'ly. He likes her well enough, but she don't take no 'count of him."

"'Tis terrible coorious," said Rob.

His master looked at him sharply, but every freckle on his face spelt innocence.

"Maidens is all under the surface. Maybe her silly heart's set elsewhere. S'pose now the little fule's took a fancy to a sandy-

headed, raw-boned giant by the name o' Basset—theer's a fix for a faither to find hisself in!"

Rob got red-hot, and grunted to hide his confusion.

"By golles!" he gasped. "No, 'ted'n me—'ted'n wi'in the bounds o' chance such a' 'mazin' thing as that should fall out, though Lard knaws I love her cruel. She'm fit mate for a royal duke, for that matter; but me—you'm makin' fun o' me, I reckon."

"Get to work," said the farmer, "an' leave things to right themselves. I hope, when Phil's made a mark in the world, as my girl will be drawed that way; but marryin's a life job, an' I ban't the man to drive any maid against the grain of her heart. Awnly the chap'll need to be a snug man, an' a good man—I swear to that. And don't you heed what I said 'bout you. 'Twas awnly to show what idiots the best darters be sometimes."

"What might be your figure o' money for a snug man, maister?"

"A thousand pounds put away in Funds or some such safe matters. A thousand—no less; that 's my mark for him what has Daisy."

"I reckon her 'll die a maid then," said Rob, drily.

"An' no gert harm if she do. So gude as her have done so. Not but what I 'd feel sorry, bein' the last o' my fam'ly. The farm would go to they Badgers o' Bovey then—new-fangled folks as I never did hold with. But better bide as you 'm born, wi' what a faither can leave 'e, than meet trouble half way by gwaine shares in nothin' wi' the first fule as axes you."

They worked in silence awhile, then Rob asked a question.

"S'pose, for the mad fancy o' the thing, as I 'd a gotten a thousand pound o' gold stowed away safe—would 'e let me walk out wi' Miss Margaret then, if 'er was agreeable to it?"

"'Tis a dam' silly question, Rob Basset," replied Mr. Chugg, "an' I 'd have took 'e to

have more sense than to put it. You ax me again, my son, when you 've got your hand 'pon the money."

Ten minutes later, as Rob worked with a will, though his thoughts were far away, the probability foretold by Duckworth turned to fact, and Farmer Chugg's pick suddenly went through the wall. He had just levered out a big stone with it, and was prising another when the second piece of granite fell inwards and revealed a black hole the size of a man's head.

" Glory be ! " cried Bob, " the rest 's as easy as singing."

Soon a wide aperture gaped in the old wall. The bottom of the narrow way into which they had penetrated ran at a level with the kitchen wainscot, but, unlike the kitchen, which was paved with stone, it had a wooden floor of oak, now black with age. Rob soon found room to creep through, and, working from the inside, he quickly demolished all that was necessary of the wall. It remained to

burrow on through the other side of the passage-way, but, meantime, a survey of this unsuspected secret place occupied the discoverers.

"One end may lead to the bricked-up door in the farmyard that Phil pointed out; an' mighty convenient 'twill be if 'tis so; but where do the other end go?" enquired the farmer; and Basset set to work to ascertain.

After lighting a candle-end, for the place was buried in darkness, he found that one extremity of the newly-discovered tunnel stopped abruptly at the brickwork of the kitchen chimney; while the other, after proceeding for a distance of four or five yards, dipped down a flight of five shallow steps, and terminated at a stout oak door. This door it was that had been left standing in a part of a former dwelling-house; but, proving useless to Woolcrofts in the opinion of the original architect, the exit had been immured from outside; and it was here that Phil

Duckworth's eyes detected the comparatively modern brickwork in its surrounding of stone. Thus preserved, this venerable oak portal was still round and stout, save for a rotten beam or two. Its rude ironwork, and heavy bolts rusted into their sockets, spoke of times and mysteries long past. Rob examined the narrow passage from end to end, but found nothing of interest. Then, holding his light above him and looking upwards to the arched roof of the passage, a protuberance in each wall, just out of reach of his hand, cast long shadows upwards in the candle-light, and so challenged his attention. He found that a narrow stone pillar supported the arch of the roof on either side, and it was the abacus of the capital which just jutted beyond the level of the wall, and flung the rounded shadow above. Then Rob made a discovery after all, for, calling to Mr. Chugg, he had a chair handed to him, and, mounting it, inspected both capitals of the pillars. Each was roughly carved with a grotesque and grinning head;

and on that above the northern pillar, so placed as to be wholly invisible to anybody standing in the passage-way below, the searcher came upon a leathern gauntlet of venerable pattern and mouldy aspect.

It was black and rotten with age, but rolled within it appeared a scroll of writing. The latter had apparently worn better than its covering, for, on Rob bringing the manuscripts to the light, Mr. Chugg discovered them to consist of two square sheets of thick, coarse-grained paper, covered with closely-written characters in a caligraphy extremely minute, and quite beyond the finder's power to decipher.

"There 's some 'mazin' flourish and flummery 'bout the pen strokes," said Farmer Chugg, "but I doubt Phil will be able to make sense of it. I lay what man can write, man can read, if it comes to that; but 'tis a auld-world hand for sartain. Us haven't got no time to pen so butivul as that in these busy days."

"Anyway, you an' me have done a brave marnin's work," declared Rob, coming out of the hole in the wall, and shaking himself free of cobwebs and dust. "I knawed when we started us would have our way wi' thicky wall, an' us have. Now there 'll be two fine doors 'stead of one, an' as to this little skewy writin', 'tis no gert odds if Phil can't read it, nor Miss Daisy neither; I lay 'twas writ for ancient men as be underground this many a day."

After breakfast Farmer Chugg laid the manuscript before young Duckworth. The boy's brown eyes shone with eagerness and enthusiasm as he heard the story of Rob's discovery. He perused the venerable paper with profound excitement, frowning here and there as a word beat him, smiling and running his hand through his black hair when a passage seemed clear.

"Read it out, lad, if 'tis such brave hearin'," said Rob.

"Aye," chimed in the master of Woolcrofts;

"I knawed you 'd knock sense out of it, if so be there was any hid there."

"I can't let you have it straight away," explained Phil, "because some of it 's faded and some 's writ so small 'twill take a bit of time to get it clear with a magnifying glass. But I 'll work at it all day, and write it out fair, and read it to you this evening. 'Twas put down in King Charles the First's times if you 'll credit it!"

Margaret cried aloud with excitement, and stretched out her hands for the paper, then drew them back again and stifled her interest. Farmer Chugg beamed on Phil and nodded his head in triumphant approval; Rob Basset listened with his mouth opened. Then he shut it, and asked a question. He seemed sceptical as to the truth of the last assertion.

"How do 'e show that, lad?"

"The date, the date. That 's clear—and the name of the writer too. I was not mistaken when I thought the manor of the Strodes stood here once upon a time. There you are,

at the end of the page: 'Michael Strode, Knight.' That big 'K' and small 't' signify the rank of the writer."

"My stars! it's like to Pharaoh's magicians —gormed if it ban't!" said Rob.

"And it seems an extraordinary document, altogether—as much as I can make out yet. There's something about a scorpion's heart and a wolf's jaws and cartloads of silver money. Perhaps Miss Daisy will help me to translate it all? If she handles the pen while I dictate word for word, it would save time."

"Sure I'd be proud to have any hand in such a lofty matter as this screed comed down 'pon us from King Charles," declared Farmer Chugg, looking at his daughter.

"I lay anybody would," ventured Rob, his heart beating; "an' I be proud as a peacock wi' a gold tail to think as 'twas me what found it."

"Thank you, but I've got something else to do," declared Margaret, stiffly. "Phil

will get on very well without any help from me."

"You 'll have to change your tune yet, my blue-eyed beauty," said Phil to himself, his eyes grown ugly at the snub. But he kept them fixed on the paper under his hand, and nobody observed his indignation.

CHAPTER III.

SIR MICHAEL'S MESSAGE.

PHIL devoted his day to the congenial task of studying and transcribing a most singular communication from the past. Now and then he stopped in his work, dropped his pen, and walked up and down the attic which was his bedroom. Thither he had taken himself and his business when Margaret refused so pointedly to help him.

"I wish to God I 'd found it, and not that lout," he said to himself more than once. Then, with another reflection, came a more satisfied look to his face. "Any way, it won't benefit the man much. I can't make head or tail of it myself yet, and as to Rob, one might as well think he 'd solve the riddle of the Sphinx as understand the problem set here. *He 'll* never be any the richer, whoever else may be."

By supper time the young man had written a fair copy of the document, and it was not without a sense of his own importance that he spread the papers before him when the meal was ended. An interested audience hung on every word, for Mr. Chugg and his daughter, old John Basset and his son Rob, with three of the other labourers and Margaret's handmaidens, were all assembled. The men smoked; the women were at needlework. Phil took an armchair, directed that another candle should be lighted especially for his benefit, settled himself to his satisfaction, and read his copy of the papers found in the old gauntlet:—

"Written here in my Manor of Strode, in the Hundred of Mew*, Forest of Dartmoor, in County Devon, on the night of the ninth day of February, being the year of our Lord 1646, by me, Michael Strode, Kt.; sometime Custos Rotulorum, sometime scholar and antiquary; but in these vile, brabbling days,

* Mew: former name of Meavy.

soldier of the King, until the intestine wars be ended or life doth quit this poor body.

"Of a truth, these our times be smothered in fumes of sedition and conspiracy, and the age in which we live wholly blasted by such Gorgon sights as have not froze man's blood this many years. For the Parliament doth give a law to its Sovereign Prince; the subject hath dictated to his King; and the yoke of obedience to the Anointed of the Everlasting being now cast off by the base and the leaders of the base, a second Bannocksbourn is most like to be tried at no distant date. God send that the issue of the encounter be read to better purpose, and that it shall fare far otherwise with Cromwell and his pestilent followers than with Bruce aforetime. As for me, my heart bleeds redder than our ruddy land to see the part which the West doth play in this, for prognostics of imminent ill do frown upon the King, blown against him from the habitations of all the winds; and Devon, that bred a Drake and scattered the Armada of Spain

for Elizabeth, turns to the Devil's Anointed and loves her King no more. Near four years agone, at Modbury, where, as I remember, the craven train bands scattered like chaff before the flail of Ruthen and his troopers, was suffered that loss which blights and consumes us now. Oh, for the High Sheriff, the Seymours, the Champernownes, Fortescue, and the rest! But affairs return upon primal chaos; the poison runs within the gaping ears of the commonalty; to bills they beat their ploughshares; let one further great occasion but master us, and the red land is lost.

"Dear God, this accursed Cromwell! A fit core he for the filthy apple of rebellion, whose pips blacken all the world. May we but meet; may the future hold the spectacle of us two face to face! Even as the Frenchman, the stout Lord Cordes, had been content to roast him seven years in hell, so that by such payment he had won again from us fair Calais in the Seventh Henry's time, so now I, that

set this down, would suffer torment no less, did but Heaven permit my steel to shear the botchy, speckled toad's head of Cromwell from off his bullock neck.

"But that the King's sword shall surely maintain his sceptre I nothing doubt; and to that end I hasten forth of my home at to-morrow's dawning with purpose to join my slight force to that of my Lord Hopton at Torrington. There was it that, two years ago last August, the King's men did gallantly hold the town against the yelping rabble of Bideford and Barnstaple; and now his lordship doth design relief for Exeter, as I gladly learn. Me he therefore summons to his side, and the more eagerly because I know the faithful city in all its ways. Its strength is written on the tablets of my brain, neither is its weakness hidden from me. So I depart, praying upon my knees that it may be within God Almighty's purpose to crown our pending enterprises with victory, and to lift the heads of Fairfax and Cromwell from off their traitorous bodies

before the buds of the spring season have burst to gladden the land.

"And because Heaven alone knoweth whether peradventure I return to cross again the threshold of my birthplace, I write here for the better understanding of such as may follow after. It happens that there is to-day no kinsman so near to my blood that I may set him above his fellows. My wife is dead, and children have I none. Therefore I, that am a lonely leaf on a topmost bough, above much lower, lesser foliage, do make no choice of a living heir; but, plunging into the remote future, hereby proclaim that when good granite crumbles, when this, the home of my father and my father's father, lifts up its shining fane to read the wind no more, then he into whose hand my scrip doth fall, shall have and hold the bequest mentioned in a later clause of the same.

"But rather than my treasure fall to some muddy rascal of no pretentions to learning, I do choose to wrap my meaning in scholarly

and subtle phrase, thus challenging a head-piece more than common clear. That no fool will read me this cryptic conceit following I know full well; nor shall it be interpreted by a brain wholly ignorant of my native land, and those heath-clad hills that stretch their arms about my domain. I pray that a wise Western man may sooner or late come by what I leave. And, if it be so, let him follow his King, and have the weal of England writ upon his heart and the welfare of Devon stamped upon his brain. Let him put this, my gift, to wise and virtuous employment; to God let him freely give a tithe that the rest may carry with it the richer blessing. But if to ill uses he is pleased to devote it, then with my dying breath shall I pray that my silver pieces (hidden by me in August last, sent forth but two years agone from the Mint of Exeter, and having King Charles his person graven nobly on every coin) may bring perdition to the finder's soul and every manner of temporal evil to his body. 'Tis nearly all I have of

money remaining from great possessions; and the rest of my substance, save these crowns, my diminished lands and the house above my head is all consumed in following the wars. So now, friend unborn, suffer ye my silver to be a touchstone to your wit, and the knotty problem that I have set you, seek to solve with the best skill you may. Failing your success, my money must surely be hid in the bowels of the land until the Trump of God and the ultimate fires."

Phil stopped a moment to gain his breath.

"Now follows the riddle," he said. "I shouldn't like to assert, of course, that Rob won't be able to guess the answer, but it's rather a poser. I can't see daylight in it myself—not yet."

"Go on wi' Sir Michael. Us don't want to hear you in the midst of all this butivul coorious writin'," said Rob, bluntly; and Margaret, hidden in a dark corner behind her father, nodded her head approvingly.

"You may want to hear me later on, though,

if I happen to guess the answer—eh?" said young Duckworth, rather coldly. Then he looked at Rob with little friendship in his gaze, and turned again to the manuscript. "The puzzle is put on the top of the second page by itself, and written in differently-shaped characters. You can compare it with my transcription when I have finished."

So speaking, he continued his reading as follows:—

"*From the Summer Solstice count ye days sixty, and upon one of those five nights which follow on the sixtieth day, set forth to seek a wonder. First find the jaws of the Wolf at midnight, and bestow your body at a mystic spot from the which the meal of that monster shall be visible. Then behold the Heart of the Scorpion within the jaws of the Wolf; yes, the Heart of the Scorpion between the teeth of him. From one spot on the Moors of Dart, and one alone, is that stupendous apparition to be observed of man. Let him, therefore, who hath the fortune to light thereon, having first seen what I describe, take*

straightway four paces to the right hand, leaving the Wolf's jaws upon his left. On the completion of the fourth step, let him heed his shins, turn at right angles to his former course, and march forward ten further paces. But if he be an undersized man and something short in the leg, let him stride twelve paces instead of ten, else he will under-shoot the mark. This done, he shall strike into the breast of the land and dig as though about the fashioning of a grave full nine feet deep."

"That's the puzzle, Rob Basset. I hope you'll guess it," said Phil.

"I might do the diggin', no doubt, but that's all I'm good for, I reckon," answered Rob, frankly.

"Be that the lot?" asked Farmer Chugg.

"Not quite; there are just some farewell words which I'll read, and make an end of the business. Sir Michael finishes like this."

And Phil completed his rehearsal:—

"The wind, which ever rises as messenger to the dawn, doth now set a loose spray of ivy

tapping at the mullions of my casement. 'Tis odds but our brave fellows already stir, and I must yet seek a few hours of slumber before we get to saddle. One word only therefore. Should it please God to bring me with life from the forthcoming conflicts and suffer me again to see my home, then these words will be destroyed, and my own hand may restore the silver to the light; if not, my writing, now to be craftily hidden in a secret causeway, whose entrance from this chamber is only known to myself in the land of the living, shall repose until years untold have passed, and the face of these domains be altered mightily. And so you, deep hid in the centuries, farewell. The cock doth crow from the darkness, knowing without eyes that the day cometh, and afar off another answers him, and yet another. Even so I to you crow out of the darkness of time past, knowing that a morning shall surely dawn when these my words will again see the eternal sun and once more be mirrored in man's eyes."

"That's all," said Phil; and the voices began to hum upon his silence.

"What have 'e got to say, lad? Can 'e make rhyme or reason of it?" asked the master.

"Not yet; but I dare say the puzzle isn't so deep as it looks," answered young Duckworth. "Sir Michael Strode," he added, "himself perished not long after he wrote his paper, with those who fell in that midnight attack on Hopton's forces made by Fairfax and Cromwell with the Parliamentary troops at Torrington. Hopton was wounded himself, and over six hundred of the Royalists were taken prisoners. So the 'great occasion' poor Sir Michael feared did master him and his party, for the war, as far as Devon was concerned, practically ended at Torrington. It was a lively time, I should think. Hopton's men turned the church into a powder magazine, and the Roundheads had just driven two hundred poor devils into it when the powder was ignited, and friends and foes were all

blown to glory together. A chronicler of the event says that though the Books of Common Prayer were blown up, the Bible was preserved and not obliterated, although it was blown clean away. You can believe that if you please."

"'Tis an amazin' rigmarole, sure 'nough—this writin' I mean," declared Rob. "I reckon the money 's tolerable safe, too. It 'll bide where 'tis till the old gentleman comes to fetch it hisself, I should say."

"Maybe Phil will knock the bottom out of it," said Farmer Chugg hopefully. "If there's a man in Meavy can do it, 'tis him."

"Not me, Mr. Chugg. I shan't addle my brains with it, I promise you. 'Tis Rob's money—if he can put his hand on it—not mine. Let Rob find it, then."

Rob laughed at the idea, and his white teeth glimmered in the candle-light.

"I find it? Ess, fay! When the cuckoo builds her awn nest an' feeds her awn little 'uns—then I 'll find it."

"'Tis a selfish thing not to help another man to good fortune, if the power's given you to do it," said Margaret shortly and suddenly.

"Of course I'd do anything I possibly could, Daisy," retorted Phil, "but you put the matter in a nutshell; the power isn't given me. What can I make of the 'scorpion's heart' and the 'jaws of the wolf,' and all the rest of it? As like as not the old Knight was mad when he wrote it. Whoever heard of burying good money nine feet deep in the ground?"

"'Tis like this," explained Farmer Chugg; "the poor soul was sore driven wi' trouble an' the stress o' the times. I reckon he hid the money because he feared that bad hands might close over it when he was took. But that's one thing, and to find it be another pair o' shoes entirely."

"'Tis Rob's, not mine, any way," said Phil.

"So 'tis, as I comed by the dockyments;

but I 'd sell my interest in the lot for a fi'-pun' note all the same," declared Rob.

Phil looked rather inclined to take the other at his word, but it happened that he did not possess a five-pound note.

"If you aren't a fool you 'll withdraw that offer, Rob Basset," said Margaret; and then she grew hot as the eyes of the party turned upon her.

"So I will then," answered Rob promptly; "and I 'll do more yet. Here 's the bit o' writin', an' I makes it over to you, Miss Daisy, for your very awn like. Much good may it do you. Now, if Phil Duckworth do want to oblige a lady, he knaws how he can set about it!"

Everybody laughed but Phil himself, and Farmer Chugg expressed his satisfaction.

"If that ban't about the smartest thing you ever done in your life, Rob! Now get me my nightcap, Daisy. Us 'll have the bottle wi' a red seal, and hot water wi' a

lemon an' sugar to-night; an' them as will can share it."

"We'll drink to this here Sir Michael Strode, so us will," declared Farmer Chugg's head-man. "I don't know nothin' 'tall 'bout his money, but that theer passage-way will come in brave an' handy for the milkcans from the cowyard."

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE OWL-LIGHT.

TWO of the giant forces which weave the web of human affairs had now got hold upon Duckworth and Rob Basset. Money-hunger gnawed the heart of one; the other was in love. All sleep and all peace of mind left Phil before the mental vision of stupendous hidden wealth. He longed to drag the silver from its centuries of slumber, and the fact that the crowns were not his property no longer lessened his desire to come at them. He argued with himself that the finder, by the terms of Sir Michael's message, had a right to be the keeper. The money was for him who could read the riddle and discover it. But the ethical side of the question he did not pursue. In any case, as Basset had made over the old glove and its contents to

Margaret, discovery of the fortune would only imply an ultimate enrichment of himself.

While the young man had no real love for Farmer Chugg's daughter, the prospect of future union with her was fixed in his mind as a certainty, and, being aware of her father's admiration for him and aspirations towards the match, he feared nothing in that quarter, and was well content to wait awhile. But now came the unexpected discovery of a rival in Rob Basset. Rob truly appeared the reverse of formidable in himself, but became gravely so by the accident of Margaret's own views with respect to him.

While Phil concerned his thoughts with the hidden money, his rival's slow brains and big heart were tackling an opposite problem, were fired with a widely different emotion. Since the opening of the old wall and the conversation which accompanied that work, Rob's soul was filled with the great matter of Margaret. He had heard in his master's own scornful words that the girl was led

astray by sandy-polled, big-limbed Rob himself; yet Mr. Chugg only cited the fact as an example of the mad lengths to which a maid's mind will occasionally go. He had no suspicion of Basset's own smothered feelings, or, it is to be assumed, the confession would not have been made. But Rob saw nothing to suggest a wandering mind in the alleged folly of his master's daughter. His heart sang upon this glorious news; that small steady flame, which he had smothered and hidden from every eye, burst into a blaze fed by such fuel. He was only a young man, and the conflagration quickly grew beyond his power to conceal. Then Peter Chugg found out his mistake, and the result of his discovery promised speedy dislocation of the even and monotonous life at Woolcrofts.

Margaret accepted the old glove and its curious contents; while the matter of her wealth became a joke, and nobody thought seriously of it, excepting Phil. Basset frankly owned himself one of the muddy rascals named

in Sir Michael's message, and both he and the girl who loved him had now found something more distracting than money from any mint whatsoever. The grey eyes which aforetime never met her blue ones save by an accident, would now do so, and that not seldom, from which incident she never failed to draw delight. Such stealing of glances was indeed a sweeter experience than life had yet brought her. Rob's old frank manners changed into an ungainly and delicious awkwardness. He blushed and broke things. So Daisy awoke to her power over him; but she did not dream of his power yet, for the great bear's hug of a caress, that came when he caught her in the owl-light under the oak hedge, had yet to be given.

Phil dimly noted the change in Basset, but he marked the man and failed to observe the girl. While Rob could comprehend Margaret's secret, it was invisible to his rival, Cupid's code being only decipherable by the possessor of the key. But these

visible evidences of ploughboy Basset's love merely served to amuse the scholar. His mind, despite the particular studies attracting him from day to day, was always with the Heart of the Scorpion in the jaws of the Wolf. And then Fate, in a cynical vein, tossed to Phil Duckworth a part of the solution to Sir Michael's puzzle. Once discovered, the certainty of a step upon the right track almost intoxicated him. Already he fell to counting the coins.

It happened that Phil, whose slight acquaintance with astronomy has been hinted at, determined, during the fine nights of early August, to learn a little more of that subject. At the same time he designed to polish some scanty knowledge he had acquired during the previous winter and suffered since to rust. His reason for this sudden determination was a remarkable red star of the first magnitude which he had not observed with intelligent eyes until that summer. Indeed, he could not remember to have seen

it at any time in the past. This repeatedly attracted his attention in the southern sky after nightfall. It rose not high above the horizon, and, from his point of view, at Woolcrofts, had vanished beneath it again before midnight. Unfamiliar with the summer constellations, Phil consulted his books and found the great red star to be Antares in Scorpio; then his heart leapt, for he saw the alternative name of that remote sun—Cor Scorpionis. He could translate those words, and the book fell from his hand upon the table. Almost unconsciously he shut it and peered hastily round his attic, fearing that some other inquirer might already share his secret. The riddle he knew by heart, and now gabbled it to himself to see what change had come into its significance seen by the light of his sudden knowledge:—

"From the Summer Solstice count ye days sixty, and upon one of those five nights which follow on the sixtieth day, set forth to seek a wonder. First find the jaws of the Wolf at

midnight, and bestow your body at a mystic spot from the which the meal of that monster shall be visible. Then behold the Heart of the Scorpion within the jaws of the Wolf; yes, the Heart of the Scorpion between the teeth of him."

The hour named and the season of the year both pointed to the red summer star; and as Sir Michael had referred to one real object under a fanciful name, it appeared probable that he had treated the other in like manner.

"'First find the jaws of the Wolf,'" pondered Phil. "There must be some spot, and that not far distant from Meavy, where, standing under certain conditions, I should see somewhere near midnight a configuration which could be described as the Heart of the Scorpion within the jaws of the Wolf. The Heart of the Scorpion I have; and one thing is certain: if I cannot find the Wolf within ten days, it will not be found at all—this year, at any rate. To-morrow is the fifty-

fifth day from the Summer Solstice, and I suppose the Heart of the Scorpion only goes into the mouth of the Wolf on the five days that follow the sixtieth, according to the puzzle." Then he wondered if the face of the sky had changed sufficiently, during the lapse of years since the enigma of the crowns had been written, to render the secret impossible of solution; but that possibility he did not pursue, for the first thing to occupy him was the finding of the Wolf.

A most convenient spot from which to get a study of Antares was a small eminence known as Skull Tor. It lay upon the high land, some two miles distant from Meavy. Beneath this lofty position the unchanging wastes of Dartmoor swept solemnly away, and the face of the eternal sky was visible above it to a horizon at great distance from the spectator. The round, brown summit of Skull Tor, with its apex of splintered granite, offered no particular resemblance to the relic of mortality after which it was named; and

though no suggestion of loftiness appeared in it, yet the peak was very high, and approached nearer to the stars than many more abrupt and picturesque points of greater apparent altitude. Night after night did Duckworth climb the granite crown of Skull Tor and view the apparition of Alpha Scorpionis as it followed that brief segment of its course visible in our northern latitudes; but nothing came of his vigils, and though he shifted his position many times, and ultimately sought other points and prominences from which to see the star, no light upon the darkness of the puzzle rewarded him. By day he investigated the region round and about Meavy, and it was upon an occasion of returning from one of these fruitless rambles, in a temper rapidly growing sour from disappointment, that a battle in summer dusk began and ended.

Above "Marchant's Cross"—an old moorland symbol of Christianity standing just beyond Meavy river, where the hill springs upwards—a pathway winds from the moor,

passes beside a hedge, and ultimately enters the main road by the old cross. Another track extends upon the lower side of the hedge; and it happened that Phil, coming down the upper road from the moor, heard Margaret's voice within ten yards of him, on the other side of the obstacle. A full moon gave plenty of light, and, peeping through the brambles and oak saplings which crowned the screen between them, Phil saw the girl he meant to marry in Rob Basset's arms. To a third observer there had then been presented the spectacle of a man in hell on one side of a hedge, a man in heaven on the other.

Farmer Chugg was present that night at a parochial meeting in his capacity of the vicar's churchwarden, and his daughter had taken the occasion to go towards a certain coppice in the cool evening air and seek for glow-worms. Rob it was who told her exactly where they might be found; and naturally he chanced in the same direction at the same time. Then, when the moon dimmed the glimmer of the

glow-worms where they twinkled their little lamps in the dewy grasses; when the church clock had echoed nine and the village lights were already beginning to vanish, Daisy turned homeward and Basset walked beside her. Something told them both that a great moment was at hand. Rob felt his heart bounding and pounding at him; Daisy was in a flutter too, for the man had remained silent nearly ten minutes and made no answer to three of her remarks. She heard him puffing and sighing. Then he flung his clay pipe away and cleared his throat, and said:

"There ban't no need to walk so spry, be there?"

"'Tis getting late, Rob. What's the matter with you? You're not wasting words to-night."

"No. I ban't no prate-apace best o' times. An' I want to say somethin' to 'e, but blamed if I knaws how."

"Is it just a simple, natural thing? Or, perhaps, 'tis difficult and strange, Rob?"

"'Tis all three—natural 'nough, an' difficult, tu, an' 'mazin' straange to me, yet not straange neither——"

"Then there are words for it, I suppose?"

"Ess fay! Theer 's wan word anyhow, an' I judge king or tinker 's got to use the same when they goes courtin', if they wants to make theer meanin' clear to the maiden. I wants 'e to walk along wi' me, Daisy, 'cause I loves 'e somethin' cruel—I do so."

"Oh, Rob Basset!"

"I 'm daft to think it, I s'pose, not bein' much better than a labourin' man. Yet—eh? Could 'e? Will 'e, Margaret Chugg?"

"Yes, then, and I will, Rob Basset. If ever I marry any man I 'll marry you; an' I love you with all my heart, you gert dear giant of a Rob—there now."

"My awn maid! Me to get the bestest, butivulest one in the whole airth—just for the axin'! God's gudeness! Come here; come close, I tell 'e. Let 's see who 'll take 'e away now!"

The command of his voice sounded sweet to Margaret. In a moment she was in his arms, felt the strength of them closing round her like a vice, and screamed low, half laughing, half frightened.

"Don't, don't, dear heart! You 'll bruise me black and blue. Oh!"

"'Twas awnly a lil, soft cuddle. If I squeezed 'e same as I loved 'e, theer 'd be nothin' left. Kiss me again, Daisy, just wance more. There, an' may God be kind to 'e ever after, amen. Now, if I dropped dead this instant moment, I guess as I 'd go smilin', for I 've had more 'n my share o' gude things."

Then it was that a crash startled them on the hedge-top; a heavy body came suddenly through the oak saplings and stood white-faced before Rob as he started away from his sweetheart.

"This is a nice, damned blackguard business, Basset!" said the newcomer, his voice thick with passion and his words tripping each other up. "How dare you abuse Mr. Chugg's con-

fidence this way? A man you owe so much to. Thank Heaven I was sent; it's a providence. Oh, Daisy, how could you do it, knowing your father's views so well? What have I done to have suffered this?"

The girl gasped and looked at him with round moonlit eyes. She could not speak. This sudden fright had taken her breath. Now she was angry, but had not yet the power to use her tongue. Rob spoke for her.

"The way's straight an' safe, Daisy dear. Best you slip along home. Me an' this here chap will talk easier when you 'm gone."

"I will then," gasped the girl. "And Lord send there are no more cowardly fellows creeping about behind hedges listening to what doesn't concern them."

Not waiting for an answer, she was off. The men heard her hasty footsteps, listened to the wooden gate at the bottom of the lane fall to behind her, and then turned each to the other.

Rob spoke first. He was slow to anger, and

it took long to smother his natural good temper and light the fires of wrath. They smouldered, burst out painfully, raged for a brief space and as quickly died. Now the painful process of ignition was taking place. He panted under a great insult; his eyes took the sulky tigerish look that precedes sudden outburst of temper in the passionate; his slow brains were gradually estimating the extent of his injury and the gravity of Phil's offence.

"Who be you, Phil Duckworth, to come between me an' that maid as loves me true, sneakin' like a low thief under hedges an' listenin' to things an' words what did ought to be hid from everyone but God A'mighty? Ban't you 'shamed o' your dirty actions? 'Tis a low twoad's trick, an' what you said just now was damn impidence an' no less. I never heard tell o' nothin' impidenter. Who made you guardian angel o' Peter Chugg's darter? If you was to lay hold 'pon some honest work an' earn your bread like a man, 'twould be a better life to show; an' now I 've told 'e. An'

never you dare to come atwixt my maid an' me again, or I 'll break every bone in your lazy body!"

"And now perhaps you 'll listen to me. You 're the coward and the thief. You know as well as I do that Farmer Chugg means me to marry Margaret one day. It 's his wish and will, and I 've never crossed him in anything, owing him so much as I do; and I 'm not going to cross him in that. You knew, and she knew. You take his money and hoodwink him like this. You play with a silly girl, knowing right well that she can never marry you. There 's no honour or proper feeling in you. It 's horribly wicked and you know it. Under the circumstances I had a perfect right to interfere; and I shall do more; I shall tell Mr. Chugg everything. It 's my duty."

"You dirty snake of a feller!" thundered back the other, fairly ablaze. "You 'm a braave man for any maiden's likin'—creepin' to win her under her faither's coat-tail! Wheer 's the woman would look at you, for all

your black eyes and book-larnin'? Tell Farmer if you mind to. I lay he won't think no better of 'e for it. He 'm a man anyway—not a tale-bearer or a lover of it. An' if you do say anything, blast me if I don't hammer every word back down your throat wi' my fists. She loves me so true as a heart can, an' she ban't afeared to wait for wan as ban't afeared to work for her. I won her fair an' straight; you never tried. You did look at her same as a man looks at a apple what he 'm gwaine to eat bimebye when 'tis ripe; an' she knawed it. 'Ted 'n for the likes o' she—so butivul an' good—to wait for the likes o' you to drop the handkercher. You 've lost her an' I 've won her, an' theer 's an end of it; an' if theer 's any hookem-snivey dealin's behind my back, I 'll make you sorry ever you was born!"

The absolute truth of the fact that he had lost Margaret upset what little self-control remained to Phil. He was burning with mere brute passion to bruise, bite, hurt, maim, and,

if possible, destroy the speaker. All his self-control was gone. Into his mind just then leapt the fact that Rob, though bigger and stronger, knew nothing of wrestling—a sport Phil excelled at. He would fight, then close; and his knowledge of falls might enable him, with a little luck, to do the big man real injury —a consummation much to be desired.

"You talk about great things with your mutton fists, you poor, clod-hopping clown," he said, as calmly as he could. "Better set to work. When you 've thrashed me you can crow. That will be soon enough."

"I reckon you 'm right," answered Rob. "The likes of you wants sense put into 'em through their hides. We 'll go down to the cross, 'tis open ground theer; an' you can stand with your back to the moonshine, which will give 'e the best on 't, bein' the smaller man."

Side by side, without more words, they walked to the open sward that extended in a triangle at the branching roads before Mar-

chant's Cross. From above there fell a flood of silver light. An owl hooted close at hand, then, soft and silent as a moonbeam, it rose, swept noiselessly past them and vanished.

Rob took off his coat, tightened his leather belt, licked his hands, and waited with his face to the moon. Then Phil, having made similar preparations, approached him. The elder man stood over his opponent, but had no knowledge of scientific fighting. Phil began the moment he was within reach, and hit Basset hard on the throat. This was the best thing that could have happened for Rob's chances, as it put a little devil into him, and hardened a heart by nature far too soft for this task. Already he felt ashamed to be standing there to punish one smaller than himself; but the smart smack on the throat, and another heavy blow on the mouth, told him that he had a man in front of him and not a child. He swung his big arms like flails, and hit Phil heavily in the body; then, after one scrambling grip, from which Rob broke away, the younger man got a strong

hold, twisted Basset fairly over his thigh, and cross-buttocked him with all the force and severity he could get into the throw. But nothing was broken, and Rob rose up again, then stretched his arms out wildly to renew the fight. He had fallen with his head on a stone, and the blood trickled in a black network over his face under the moonlight. He spat and sputtered, and rubbed it out of his eyes with his hand.

"Best wait till you are breathed," said Phil coolly. "First blood to me. That 's not much like hammering my words down my throat, is it?"

"I didn't count 'pon wras'lin'; an' 'ted'n first blood, 'cause you thrawed me, an' 'twas a stone cut my head. Us 'll try again."

Now, despite the fact that blood dribbled down his face and into his right eye, Rob gave a better account of himself; and Phil, trying to close, got heavily hit in the body more than once.

"Below the belt, you foul-playing coward!" he shouted once; but Rob knew better.

"'Twas on your small ribs, an' you 'll see the mark in the marnin'!" he answered.

Duckworth had got home some fair round-arm blows too, and both were feeling the effect of the fighting, when the younger managed to close again. The sound of dull, sickening thuds, when a fist got home, changed to the quick struggle of feet, now lifted oft the ground, now again reaching it. Sheer weight prolonged the certain close of the bout, but this time Rob was awake, and went down easy as soon as he felt that Phil had fairly got him.

By mutual consent and without a word spoken they rested, panting for a minute, then together rose to renew their battle. Some close in-fighting was fairly divided, though Rob's blows carried a deal more power than Phil's, and the latter now finding his strength failing, tried to get out of reach without closing for another fall. But Rob,

with steam fairly up, went after him and drove him backwards. Then, just as Phil dodged to slip his man, if he could, the last blow of the fight was struck. Swinging his right clean round from the shoulder with the force of a horse's kick, Rob just caught his rival on the point of the jaw as Phil's chin came forward. The effect of this blow is well enough known, and if a bullet had gone through young Duckworth's heart he could hardly have succumbed more rapidly. Down he went in a heap and lay motionless, much to his enemy's alarm, for Rob, ignorant of the effects of the "knock-out" blow, feared his man was dead. He rushed to the neighbouring river, tore half the sleeve off his flannel shirt, soaked it in water, and returned to find the fallen enemy still motionless on his back. But the water presently revived him. He gathered consciousness, looked round him, remembered the event that put him in his present position, then got upon his feet and staggered towards his coat.

"You 'll have to help me back to Woolcrofts. I can't see or feel," he said slowly.

"So I will, then, an' thank the Lord I didn't kill 'e; an' sure I hopes us 'll be better friends now we 've come to a onderstanding like," said Rob, putting on his own coat and wiping his face.

"Don't think it. There 's war between us —war to the knife. And I wish it was to the knife. There 's foreigners who call it cowardly to fight with fists—cowardly and brutal, for the biggest generally wins. With knives big and little are equal. You 'll be sorry for this to your dying day, Robert Basset. And now you can help me home. My head 's very bad, and my ribs ache so I can't draw breath."

"I be main sorry, but wi' your wras'lin' to help 'e 'twas a fair deal enough. One had to win. You might a brawked my neck thrawin' me."

"I tried to, you may take your oath of that. But if I can't break your neck, I 'll break your heart; so now you know what to expect."

"If that's so you'd best to shut your mouth, else you might wake my dander again, smashed though you be," said Rob. He was as mild as a lamb now, and walked slowly along supporting Phil.

"I'll larn them wras'lin' holds," he continued, "an' then us'll try another fall if you like. But best not feel wicked against me no more. Things falls out 'cordin' to Providence an' such-like high matters. Anyways, me an' Daisy won't be man an' wife these years to come, for master do mean the chap who marries her to be worth not a penny less than one thousan' pound o' sterling gold. Us'll have to wait till he changes his mind, I reckon, but 'tis well knawn he takes a long time doin' so."

"You may as well cut your throat for all the chance you've got to have her. There's everything in my favour, nothing in yours."

"Do 'e think so? Then your larnin' ain't taught 'e much 'bout maidens, I reckon. Theer's awnly wan thing in my favour as be

worth a thought, I grant 'e, but then that be just the wan thing to settle the upshot most times. I've gotten the love o' the maid, you see. Now, if you can walk alone, you 'd best try an' do it. Theer 's Farmer Chugg ahead gwaine in the gate ; an' the less he larns 'bout this coil, the better for all parties."

CHAPTER V.

THE LITTLE MAN IN BLACK.

THERE was no hiding the marks of the fight from any pair of eyes at Woolcrofts, and exciting events were not so common that this sensational occurrence could be treated lightly. Garbled versions flew from the farm to Meavy, and soon various statements, mostly erroneous, were reported and believed as to the sequel of the conflict. For those chiefly concerned the murder was out at the breakfast table next morning. Margaret looked some shades paler than usual; Phil had a black eye and an ear ludicrously swollen above its proper size; Rob's forehead bore an ugly wound, over which his sweetheart had pasted a large piece of black sticking-plaster with its edges cut like a star.

"What the blazes you bwoys been about?" asked the farmer bluntly; and as neither

spoke he turned to Rob's father. But he, good man, knew no more than his master, and Mr. Chugg, therefore, put the question again more sternly, this time addressing Basset, as the elder of the culprits.

"You was five-an'-twenty come last birthday, wasn't 'e?"

"Ess, I was, maister."

"And you 've been fightin' at your time o' life wi' one half a year less in age an' two stone lighter?"

"'Twas give an' take, maister."

"I sees that much for myself. What did 'e fight about?"

"I doan't knaw as I could tell 'e that, Farmer Chugg. 'Tis all awver, anyways."

"Be gormed if 'tis! I 'm gwaine to knaw, so you may as well tell me first as last."

"'Ted'n a thing what I can tell no other man, an' I ban't gwaine to, not even you," said Rob.

"Oh! And what do you say, Phil Duckworth?"

"Please, father!" began Margaret, but she was not to be heard.

"You hold your noise," he answered, sternly but not roughly. "You and your maidens swallow your food quick an' clear off. This shameful thing's to be sifted 'fore us leaves the kitchen. Till then not another word."

Peter Chugg had no difficulty at any time in making himself obeyed. Nothing more was said till breakfast had been eaten, then, changing his mind, the master bid Basset, Phil, and Rob's father follow him to the parlour, and locked the door on himself and the party.

"Now," he said, "once more, be you gwaine to answer my question?"

"I caan't do it. Best let the past bide," said Rob.

"When I want your advice I'll ax 'e for't. An' you, Phil? Be you gwaine to beard me too?"

"No, Mister Chugg, I'm not," answered the other quietly. "It's my duty to speak,

and I 'm going to. I found your daughter and this man walking together after dark above the valley crofts under the woods. I came down by chance from the Moor, heard voices, looked through the hedge and saw Miss Daisy in this man's arms. I knew you had different ideas; I had loved the ground your daughter walked on ever since I came to Woolcrofts, and so I got mad to see it and burst through the hedge and faced them. If I said or did anything I should not have done I am sorry for it; but a man is no judge of his actions at such a time. Miss Margaret ran away home and left us. We were both hot, and we fought. Finally I was knocked insensible. When I recovered I came home. That is the truth of it."

"What do you say to that Robert Basset?"

"'Tis all true enough. Me and Miss Daisy do love one another. He comed between us wi'out no right."

"Any man had the right! After what I told 'e 'twas you who had no right to dare to think of her, a poor fule of a maid as doan't

knaw her own mind an' makes eyes at the first gert clodpole she sees 'cause he'm big in the bone. I 've done with 'e for good an' all. It ban't no use questioning me neither. Theer's a fortnight to the end of your month, then you can pack your traps an' get out of my sight."

"'Tis as you please, maister. Us caan't help nature like," said Rob mildly, and waited for Mr. Chugg to unlock the door. His father was dumb before a great misfortune, but he felt the madness of Rob's behaviour.

There the matter ended for the time. Farmer Chugg heard his daughter's version of the affair, but poor Margaret's story did not move him in the least. He told her not to make a laughing-stock of herself, applauded Phil's straightforward conduct, and would hear no word in his rival's favour. For the rest Margaret found herself sharply watched by her father. He curtailed her liberty, and would not suffer her to speak to her lover. She watered her couch with tears for six miserable nights, and then the sudden sequel of the

event came like a thunderbolt into the lives of those interested.

Phil, though high in favour with Mr. Chugg, naturally saw that the present was no time to push his suit with the farmer's daughter. He kept out of her way carefully enough; and facing the position and prospects, began to think seriously of justifying his master's regard and turning his attention to some practical pursuit by which money might be earned. This he did from no particularly worthy motive, but because he had learned enough during the recent riot to see that Mr. Chugg, while consistently well-disposed towards him, yet intended that his daughter's husband should be no man of straw.

The youth took lengthy walks and mentally pursued a hundred different courses of action, but no satisfactory line of achievement presented itself. Time sped; Robert Basset found work on the other side of the Moor, and only five days remained before his labours at Woolcrofts would be ended. Phil, finding

himself strangely unpopular with the other hands, kept more out of the way than usual; and it was upon the occasion of returning to the farm after one of his lengthy and solitary rambles that the adventure with a little man in black overtook him and awakened ambitions which had now slept for some time.

It happened that between four and five o'clock on an afternoon in late August he was returning to Meavy by the road which winds across Cadover Bridge on the high moors. At hand arose Skull Tor, its rounded and granite-capped eminence lying three parts of a mile from Cad river. The weather had recently broken and become unsettled, to the dismay of those who were already counting their harvest before it was reaped and garnered; and as the young man hastened forward, black clouds huddled angrily from the south-west and followed a vanguard of white ones. Disliking a wet jacket more than most troubles, Phil bethought him, and catching sudden sight of the splintered summit of Skull Tor, he sur-

mounted the earthen hedge, where a line of heather and furze parted the roadway from the Moor, set off running over the heath, and reached the granite concourse of boulders in time to escape the rain. In the midst of them was a natural pent-house where one flat stone had fallen and been caught and suspended between two others. Here ponies often repaired in the bad weather, and the sodden ground beneath was stamped with the impress of hoofs and pitted by the prints of many feet of sheep. Against one wall of this natural chamber a black smudge, above fragments of charcoal, burned sticks, and calcined earth, indicated that some chance wanderer had recently made a fire.

Phil's surprise was great to find a fellow-creature had already taken advantage of the lonely refuge on Skull Tor. Entering the natural chamber, he discovered a man busy brushing from his clothes the few drops of heavy thunder-rain which had fallen upon them. He was small, sharp of feature,

wizened, clean-shaven, and clad in black. A flat book bulged his pocket, and beside him lay a walking-stick of unusual thickness. The last comer, whose leathern gaiters, corduroy small clothes, and neutral-tinted jacket, marked him for a moor-man, found a pair of sharp black eyes fixed on his face, and met a singular welcome.

"What a thing it is to have a memory! What a priceless blessing and boon! Here am I, who have not visited this corner of Dartmoor for ten years, yet so familiar with the region that at the sight of rain I turn tail and scuttle away to this spot as if I lived here. Marvellous; and gratifying too, for it shows my head is cast-iron still—thank God for it!"

He spoke familiarly and beamed at Phil as though they were fellow-travellers and had long known each other.

"It's a handy thing, no doubt, sir," answered the younger man. "I've escaped a scat of rain here before to-day."

"Like enough. And it came to my mind

too, though if the truth must be told I was actually bound here. Still to recollect this hole was a feat of memory. Who would suppose a place so regularly fashioned was Nature's work ? "

Then, to Phil's surprise, the little man suddenly split his walking-stick into three. The parts were fastened together at their centres and made a neat tripod. This he fixed on the ground, placed a canvas seat upon it, and sat down. Then he took off his hat revealing a head, bald save for a fringe of thin grey hair which fell over his collar at the back.

" 'Tis a natural rocky place for all you might think, though," declared Duckworth, answering the other's remark.

" I know that as well as you. Yet how many men in my business go mad about this triangle of rocks—these sides and roof! They cite this as one of the Druid tors—Stuff and rubbish ! "

Phil knew something about the subject, and it happened that a book which he possessed

took the standpoint of the stranger, and rejected wholly the obsolete Druidic theory of Dartmoor remains. His answer therefore much pleased the little man in black.

"They are no more Druidic than the rock basins on the tors are, or the stone avenues and circles and stone implements. The rock basins come from natural weathering of the granite, and the avenues and circles were made by the 'old men,' as we call them in these parts, the first human things to open their eyes on Dartmoor."

"True! true every word of it—excepting that the 'old men' by which you understand the tin-streamers were not the first human things to come here," exclaimed the antiquary, for such he was. "Local intelligence always gives me the greatest possible gratification. You are local and you are intelligent. Good! What more do you know? Did you ever hear of the Danmonians?"

Phil displayed his acquirements with no small satisfaction after this wholesale praise,

His listener corrected him once or twice, but gave him much credit for bestowing his leisure hours on subjects so worthy. Then he bid the young man step forth and judge the weather. Duckworth thereupon made a hasty survey of the sky and the brown world beneath it. What he saw occupied the briefest moment, but must here be set out for the reader's benefit, that what follows may be better understood.

The moorland stretched in gentle and barren undulations away to the east; but southward the prospect was broken and more extensive. In that direction, behind a misty foreground of broken land and wood, stretched leagues of forest and fallow. Then, between remote dips of the high lands above the coast extended a dark line, which was the sea. To the north the heathery wastes plunged sheer and sharply into a deep valley, musical with the tinkle of many waters. Here orchards spread, and a sunburst from the west glimmered redly on gold thatches, and glinted

against whitewashed walls, where Meavy village clustered about the crocketed turrets of her old church tower. To the east, through the pink haze of the ling bloom, twined a leaden snake where Cad wound under the rain; and about its margin, their tails turned against the weather, stood horses and red cattle. Beyond the stream, two miles into the heart of the wilderness, a little farm appeared upon its patch of "new-takes" reclaimed from the moor; while still nearer, less sightly by far, and sad to the eye in their crudity of colour, arose great mounds above china-clay works. Black stumps of iron and wheels and other machinery here stuck their heads over the dead raw white of the clay, and the whole spectacle lay like an ugly wound on the face of the land. As for the sky which Phil was chiefly concerned with, the thunder-cloud had almost passed onward to the lone and featureless undulations of Cater's Beam. A ribbon of clean blue sky already marked the sea-line, and it grew broader every moment;

while the westering sun was playing golden pranks with the tattered fringes of the storm as they fled to the north-east.

"'Twill be fine in ten minutes," said Duckworth, returning to the shelter of the rocks.

"So much the better. Then I shall be able to do what I came for," answered the other. Thereupon he drew a sketch-book from his pocket, sharpened a lead pencil, and waited till the scattered banners of the storm had passed overhead, and a low sun made the wet and shining peat burn as though it was red hot.

The antiquary walked out, with no eyes for the splendour of the sky or earth. He withdrew to a distance of forty yards from the crown of the tor, then setting his tripod down again, and putting a newspaper on the ground to keep his feet dry, began to sketch. He drew in hard thin lines with remorseless accuracy, and put the stones together block for block, mass for mass, with absolute correctness but little art. Phil watched him, but

said nothing. Then the little man stopped to put another point to his pencil, and, as he did so, spoke.

"Marvellous! What a testimony to the qualities of granite! This stone endures indeed! And yet all we see is but the ruin of what was. Here stood these fragments even as we behold them, before the pyramids were raised, before Jacob went up into Egypt; before palæolithic man brought his first flint on to Dartmoor, or slew his first stag or wolf here! But human names of natural objects suffer while the things themselves laugh at Time. Ages are required to fret the granite, yet those appellations that man gives to the granite, old Time soon plays with and twists to new meanings. He works on language to an extent so bewildering that it would puzzle Müller's self to trace some of his tricks and come at the truth Time loves to bury. Take this very cluster of rocks. What is it called?"

"Skull Tor," answered Phil promptly.

"You know no better?"

"No, sir. Nor any man in these parts."

"Give me your address, and I will send you a book, if you promise to read it: one of my own."

"Thank you, I'm sure, sir."

"It is the reward of intelligence and honest desire for information. This tor is called 'skull' from no resemblance to the object, but because its original and true name was like that word. Any work, two hundred years old, which treats of the Forest of Dartmoor will be found to name this elevation 'Skol Tor.' From that point we must go back still further, for 'Skol,' in its turn, is a corruption of the Scandinavian 'Sköll'; much like 'skull' in sound, no doubt, but mighty different in meaning."

"And what does 'Sköll' signify, sir, if it's not troubling you to tell me?"

"Never a trouble to impart valuable knowledge. The word comes from old Norse mythology, and is a part of it. 'Sköll' is the

giant wolf who ever trots beside the sun and moon, and will swallow them up at the end of the world."

"Good Lord! a wolf!"

"Yes; that's why I remarked on the astounding durability of granite just now. Look at my sketch. There you have it, and the reason of the name, and the proof of the whole matter. What could be better title for that mass of rock? There's old 'Sköll' grinning at Time, as he has done through more centuries than we can guess at. The uprights of our shelter are his open jaws; the mass of rock on the left is his head. It needs little imagination to see the resemblance. If it required much, I should be the last to see it, imagination being my weak point. It is as though a monster had thrust his head through the crown of the hill and been turned to stone there."

"'The jaws of the wolf!' 'The jaws of the wolf!'" cried Phil, his thoughts far away with Sir Michael Strode's hidden silver.

"Jaws and head and all. Why! What the mischief! Good gracious me! Now that's very singular—very! Not a word! He's bolted as though he thought I'd gone mad. Perhaps he did think so! I gave him credit for more intelligence than he possessed, after all. Or perhaps *he's* gone mad. I may have put too much strain on the bucolic mind."

Professor Landor, F.S.A., addressed his soliloquy to air, for Phil, suddenly dazzled and stunned with his discovery, had shot away like a rocket, forgetting his manners and, indeed, overlooking all mundane facts save one: that he now possessed the true key of Sir Michael's riddle.

CHAPTER VI.

PHIL DOES SOME HARD WORK.

ALREADY in his mind's eye, as he hastened down the hill to Woolcrofts, young Duckworth saw the red Heart of the Scorpion in the jaws of the Wolf. A journey in the dark, the digging of a pit nine feet deep, and Sir Michael's buried silver would be reached. As he hastened unceremoniously from Professor Landor, Phil dipped into his mind upon the subject, and discovered it to be made up. Recent events and a certainty, now sufficiently manifest, that Margaret would never marry him, confirmed the young man in his determination with respect to the money. He would trouble Mr. Chugg no more on his account. All he wanted was the necessary capital to live while he looked round him and decided upon a future occupation. He pictured himself

arriving in London with thousands of pounds in his pocket, and the spectacle was so pleasing that Phil hesitated no more.

His preparations were soon made, together with plans for future action. Only the weather remained a source of uncertainty, because it was necessary that the face of the sky should be clear after midnight, in order that Antares might be witnessed between the granite jaws of "Sköll." For a rainless night the seeker had to pray. Meantime, circumstances helped him. To Woolcrofts belonged land up the Meavy valley, and it happened that in a field not more than two miles from the region of the buried money, stood a shed containing various implements of husbandry, including a barrow, picks, and spades. A wheelbarrow with the tools in it he could easily bring up to Skull Tor. Then, having found the exact grave of the silver by measurements, he proposed to unearth it and place the receptacle of the money upon his barrow. That done, he intended proceeding to Tavistock by road,

and there catching an early train which would take him by way of Exeter and the route of the South Western Railway to Waterloo. This was his programme in the rough. How chance and future circumstances might modify it he could not prophesy. But nothing happens save the unforeseen. Of all things least expected or provided for by Phil was the subsequent event of his introduction to Sir Michael Strode's crowns. One point alone he doubted: whether he should have physical strength sufficient to dig nine feet into the earth during the hours of a single night. But the matter troubled him very little. Even if he had to take two nights at it, the likelihood of any human being finding his unfinished work was remote. "They 'll only think somebody's been trying to dig out a ferret, if they find it," he reflected. "Any way, if there 's a blink of starlight, and a chance of fine weather, I 'll begin to-night. Let me only find the spot, and the rest is child's play."

Woolcrofts was usually in bed and asleep

before ten o'clock, so Phil had no difficulty in departing without any questions being asked. Farmer Chugg still stuck to it that Duckworth would find out the riddle in process of time, and occasionally through the past weeks he had raised the question, and asked if Phil could report progress. To such questions the young man had usually made the same answer: that he believed he was upon the right track, but could throw out no hope as yet. Now, Phil regretted having said even this much, for his present purpose was to leave Woolcrofts without a shadow of warning.

A dull and dreary supper was made that night. Indeed, since Rob's notice to quit had been given, something of the old, genial reciprocity at Woolcrofts Farm was dead. When the meal had ended, Basset and the others departed through the new doorway; Margaret took herself off to her room, from the window of which she knew Rob would be visible as he smoked his pipe before turning in; and Farmer Chugg, himself ill at ease

under the cold cloud that had fallen, read his journal, wrote up his accounts, and yawned through an hour until locking-up time.

Half an hour later Phil Duckworth slipped out of his little room at the top of the farm-house. In one hand he carried a dark lantern, in the other his boots. Locking his own chamber door he went silently to the kitchen, opened a window which, with the help of a string, he was able to fasten after him, and so departed. It was gloomy, but, through the portals of the high night, spaces of profound darkness sprinkled with stars could be seen from time to time as the clouds broke away. Phil trusted to get his work done before dawn, and, to that end, carried with him in his pocket the little money which he had. He hoped it might not be necessary to return to Woolcrofts, and as for his books and those few trifles he spared a little love for, they he imagined might be bought again easily enough in London. Through the night he climbed, pushing a wheelbarrow before him and rising

upwards into a black and formless world of silence that spread dimly on every side. He knew his way blindfolded, but the exceptional darkness was beyond his experience. Now and then a gentle sigh, like a voice, whispered over the great waste from a million little tinkling throats of the ling and heather; now and then the cry of night birds below in the woods, or the bark of a lonely fox, fell upon his ear; but these chance utterances of the hour were separated by intervals of a profound silence that rendered the listener breathless by its intensity.

Before midnight Phil was on Skull Tor, and felt thankful to find the darkness perceptibly decreasing under a high wind and a sky blowing clear. The stars shone out, but of planets one alone chanced to be visible: Saturn, in the constellation Virgo. First came the task of finding that essential site from which it should be possible to see Antares pass between the erect and jaw-like pinnacles of the tor; and this proved a feat more

difficult by far than Phil had expected. The great star now shone low in the sky towards that part of the horizon where by day the rim of the sea was visible. To place himself and the rocks in a direct line with Antares was not easy, while to get the star into its necessary position at first seemed almost hopeless. To master the appearance of the granite against a nocturnal sky took Phil some while; to manœuvre himself into the required position occupied still longer; but twenty minutes after midnight, and more by good luck than management, he at length found himself with his back against a boulder, in such a position that looking straight ahead he could just see the snout of "Sköll" above lesser rocks. The star at this moment twinkled clear of the peak, but as it travelled onward it vanished behind the upper jaw of the Wolf, then reappeared and hung for a few seconds in the narrow space between the stones. The configuration of the ground was such that there was absolutely no other point from which

human eye might have witnessed this spectacle, and as the apparent course of the star was daily altering, by no possibility could it have appeared in the position indicated by Sir Michael's puzzle seen from elsewhere, or at any time after the allotted days. There it was, however; the ruddy star had glowed for a brief duration within the very jaws of the Wolf; and it had warmed Phil Duckworth's heart as it did so.

Now, with the riddle long since committed to memory, he took the required paces to the right, and, on stepping the last of them, violently struck his shin against a stone. Phil grinned as he hopped with agony and rubbed his injured limb. Had not Sir Michael Strode barked his own leg centuries earlier against that identical boulder? Did not the puzzle offer a warning against such an accident? He felt hot on the very track of the treasure, and turning, according to his directions, stepped at right angles to the left as indicated, and found himself upon a little fern-covered tumulus—a

barrow-like formation, very common in all quarters of Dartmoor.

Here, then, lay the scene of his struggle. For once Phil found himself faced by hard physical labour, and, seeing the goal of it, he did not hesitate. Fetching pick and spade, throwing off coat and waistcoat, he set to work, first cutting down the fern and heather to the shape of a grave as Sir Michael directed, and next beginning to dig a great hole whose dimensions were two feet broad, five feet and a half long, and nine feet deep.

In an hour he had worked through the light peaty surface soil to a depth of nearly three feet; but after that point progress became slower, and Phil doubted whether, after all, he should be able to complete his task in one attack. Before two o'clock his lantern went out; but, scrambling to the surface for a short rest and half a pipe of tobacco, Duckworth found that a waning red moon had now risen and would presently give sufficient light for his purposes. He was full five feet nearer the

hidden treasure now, but his strength began to fail. However, the size and depth of the hole made him determine to complete his task, even if it took him until dawn. It gaped large on the hill-side; it denoted a fixed purpose and considerable labour; to mistake it for the casual work of a sportsman was impossible. So he struggled on, deciding that if no time was left to reach Tavistock that morning, he must lie quiet through the day, hidden in the heart of the woods, and get clear off by night. This plan, however, was amended as soon as made, and he determined, on second thoughts, to hide the barrow and the money, then return to Woolcrofts, get food and rest, and leave for London before dawn on the following morning, picking up his money as he went. Another foot, and yet another was removed from the growing hole; then his pick fell with a thud upon wood, and soon his spade slipped and slithered over the same hard surface. A stout box clamped with metal gradually appeared. Its weight left nothing to be desired, but the

task of getting it to ground proved slow and laborious. Phil built a succession of steps at one side of the hole, and when, after repeated efforts, he had landed his prize safely in the wheelbarrow, the young man felt his strength was spent. Roughly appraising the cubic contents of his treasure, and calculating that about seven crowns might go to a square inch, he speedily discovered that his mental powers were not equal to the calculation without pencil and paper. But the great box must hold thousands and thousands of pounds—upon that point there could be no room for doubt. Dawn already glimmered grey over the eastern hills, and knowing that within an hour the labourers at the china-clay works would be on their road from Meavy village, Phil wasted no more time, put on his coat and waistcoat, placed pick and shovel in the wheelbarrow with the money-chest, and set off. At Marchant's Cross, already mentioned, he turned away to the right, where Rob and Margaret looked for glow-worms and found a

better thing; then pushing into the heart of the woods, Duckworth proceeded to a lonely ruin under an old laurel-tree, which raised its head strangely among the more familiar vegetation of the forest. Completely covering the barrow with fern and briar, he left it here with perfect confidence, then turned for home, dropping pick and shovel in their usual places upon the way. He entered the house as he had left it, and was sleeping like the dead before the sounds of awakening life at the farm, the thud of milk into many pails, the lowing of kine, and the raising of blue wood smoke from the kitchen chimney told that another morning had come.

The day passed without event; and Phil going early to bed that night, woke at two o'clock, hastened to the woods, found his treasure where he had left it, and started for Tavistock. When, therefore, another morning came to Woolcrofts, the farmer's promising young scholar had started for London.

At the breakfast-table somebody asked for

Phil, remarking that fried potato and cabbage was a favourite dish with him. Mr. Chugg made answer:

"So like 's not he 'm studyin' in his room an' have forgot altogether, or else he 's away 'pon the quest o' that money. He ban't the sort to be beat. I 'll lay he 'll find it yet, wi' his larnin' an' brain-power."

News was brought that Phil had evidently gone out and left his little attic locked behind him. This, though an unusual event, was not extraordinary, and upon the present occasion merely served to confirm Farmer Chugg in his opinion.

"You give over pulling that long face, an' hold your chin up, Daisy. He 'll get his fingers 'pon them silver crowns of yourn yet; an' when he do, maybe you 'll find yourself rich enough to buy your faither out of Woolcrofts!"

Margaret ardently hoped that the money might be forthcoming; but if it ever reached her, she already knew full well the purpose to which it would be applied.

CHAPTER VII.

BROKEN BONES.

WHILE Phil encountered unforeseen adventures on his way to London, circumstances combined to place Rob Basset in some peril and bring upon him a misfortune far greater in its nature, and more tremendous in its consequences, than his dismissal from Woolcrofts.

Duckworth's room at the farm remained locked; he did not return at dinner time, nor was there any sign of the young man upon the close of that day.

Farmer Chugg grew uneasy, therefore, and during supper made searching inquiry of all at the table; but none knew anything. Rob casually reported the disappearance of a wheel-barrow, believed to be at a shippon on the edge of the woods, but of course the event

was not connected with Phil's absence. At ten o'clock, Mr. Chugg, now seriously alarmed, directed that Duckworth's attic under the roof should be opened, and called upon his head man to undertake the operation. For once Rob and Margaret found a moment to exchange some words. Their emotions were not a little mingled, and while neither wished hurt to Phil, yet the remote possibility of his departure was faced by them without much concern.

As the lock gave and the door swung open, half a dozen curious folk, made bold by the exceptional nature of the occasion, followed Farmer Chugg into Phil's sanctum. No particular disorder marked the chamber. A few books were scattered on his little table as usual; it was also apparent that his bed had been slept on, though not in. Some papers and a copy of Sir Michael Strode's message lay together on the table, and beside them Margaret noticed a short piece of manuscript in Phil's writing. The fact that it was written

with red ink attracted her. While nothing else in the room called for attention, or served to explain young Duckworth's protracted absence, the words in red ink unquestionably did so. They also roused those who heard them to a pitch of considerable excitement. But the listeners were few, for Margaret, having glanced over the paper herself, and quickly gathered its significance, told her father that it was of a private nature; whereupon he sent everybody away but his head man, Basset, then bade Margaret read it aloud.

"It concerns Rob, who gave me the glove and the old paper," she said, firmly, "and he ought in justice to hear it."

"Justice is justice," admitted Farmer Chugg, but reluctantly. "Let him come back."

So Rob returned, and his sweetheart read the paper. It was no more than a memorandum noted down by Phil on his return from Skull Tor, after the little man in black had told him the true name of the peak. His brief jotting ran as follows:—

"Key to Strode's riddle discovered by me, Phil Duckworth. Get the star Antares between two highest points on Skull Tor after midnight, then follow measurements according to directions in the manuscript."

"Gormed if he ain't bin an' found it!" burst out the farmer, slapping his ponderous thigh. "What did I say from the fust? Didn't I allus stick to it through thick an' thin as he would? That 's wheer he is now, I lay—a diggin' like the devil to get your silver out of the ground for you, Daisy. Blessed if the boy ban't a regular masterpiece!"

"If 'tis so, he 've been a long time makin' a nine-foot hole," said Mr. Basset, senior. The idea had also occurred to Rob, but he felt that his tongue was tied under the circumstances.

"Just to think of 'un sweating away there for more 'n twenty-four hours! An' rainin' cats and dogs, too," said Mr. Chugg.

His daughter thought for a moment, then spoke.

"It was fine last night; then he got the

puzzle put together, saw some star between the two points of the tor, I suppose, though I don't know which Antares is; but, anyway, it was Skull Tor he went to, and I suppose he 's digging up there still."

"Wants to finish his job an' bring the stuff down along wi' him, I lay. Theer 's a good plucked 'un for 'e! If 'twasn't for my rheumatics, I 'd tramp right along now this blessed minute, rain or no rain. He must be fair famished by now, an' starved wi' thirst tu."

"I 'll go up if you 'll trust me to do it," said Rob. "I 'll take a basket wi' food and drink, an' give un a hand if he be up theer diggin' or any such thing."

Farmer Chugg was doubtful, but at last he consented, and the hour being then nearly eleven, Rob started through a wild and stormy night to Skull Tor. With him he took a basket packed by Margaret; it contained two meat pasties, some baked potatoes, half a loaf, and a bottle of draught beer. He also carried a big umbrella.

"You can see that I trust you by sending you 'pon such a job as this here," explained his master, as Basset set forth. "What you 've got to do is to help the chap if he 'm theer, to give un food an' drink, an' to lend a hand wi' the work if he ban't through with it. You 'm too honest a man, I should hope, to begrudge him his gude fortune along o' his wonnerful brain parts."

"I hopes so myself," answered Rob. Then a thought struck him, and he put it into words.

"If so be the chap 's bin working theer in the rain these many hours since the bad weather broke, he 'll be drowned to the skin. Maybe a drop o' spirits neat would be gude for 'un."

"Well said," declared Mr. Chugg. "'Tis a likely thought."

Margaret added a flask of brandy to the contents of Rob's basket, and a moment later he had put his head down to the weather and tramped off.

"Doan't 'e look for me till you see me," he shouted back through the darkness. "Maybe us 'll come down-long together bimebye, maybe us won't be here 'fore morning."

Farmer Chugg slammed the farm door and shut out the ugly night. He saw Margaret's questioning eyes upon him at the same moment, and spoke as he turned to go to bed:

"'Tis a brave, butivul thing to pictur' that there boy a-workin' an' slavin' away, breaking his back in the soil to dig your money up for 'e. An' it 's gwaine to be your bounden duty after that to marry 'un. Ess fay! 'Twill be mean wages, seeing what he 's done for 'e, to fob him off with anything less than your awn self."

"But who found the glove? You won't remember that, father."

"The findin' might have happened to anybody. That 's a mere chance sarcumstance. 'Tis the onderstandin' of it I make much of," declared Mr. Chugg. "As for Basset,"

he continued, "I 've gived him a good handsome carater, an' he 's gwaine to get a shillin' a week more 'n what he had here. So he 's well out of a bad fix, and there 's an end of the matter."

Rob, meanwhile, stoically tramped through a wild night upwards to the moors. He had now grown somewhat accustomed to his position, and accepted it with the stolid outward reserve of his kind. But his heart surged against his fate; his slow brains ached through long hours of darkness into many a red dawn with strivings and mental strugglings to come at the love which was denied him. Life looked as black as the night through which he now slowly toiled. There was not a ray of hope anywhere save the grand certainty that Daisy would be true. Even had nothing occurred to send him out of her presence he quite realised that his prospects must have remained the same; but this removal from her was a bitter blow enough, and the thought of the discovery which he now

hastened to substantiate seemed to fall like a golden extinguisher on the flame of his fortunes.

But Rob was a strong man, and he had a strong man's capacity to meet the cold eye of Fate without flinching. He did not whine at the position. He was even logical. Looking back he recollected his conversation with Farmer Chugg at the piercing of the old wall, and now he saw clearly enough that what had fired him into active love-making was really spoken with a widely different object. Neither could he forget that the farmer in discussing his daughter's future had named a definite sum of money, a tremendous sum, without which in his pocket no suitor for Margaret's hand would receive a moment's consideration. His rival, it was true, had no money, and his chances of coming by a thousand pounds were nearly as remote as Rob's own; but it now seemed clear that he had solved the puzzle and put, perhaps, many thousands into Daisy's purse. Mr. Chugg

would doubtless regard that performance in a favourable light, and repay it with his daughter's hand—if he could. There was comfort of a sort in the last three words. For the present, at any rate, money or no money, Phil Duckworth had no chance. But Rob speculated on lonely days, months, years; and while he trusted his sweetheart to remain true, yet asked himself what was the use of her so doing. That he had first found the old paper was a sort of light amid the gloom of his nocturnal thoughts; yet, viewed from the present hopeless position, he saw that he had been a fool under the circumstances to give the missive to Margaret. Had he kept it and promised Phil, say, a half of the money if he could find the whole, their respective positions from a worldly point of view would have been equally promising. As things stood, however, the money was the maiden's, and Rob, amid all his speculations as to whither life would lead for him and for her in the time to come, never once stopped to view the problem from

her standpoint or consider her most probable course of action.

Having reached Skull Tor, Basset set down his basket and umbrella, put his hands to his mouth, and shouted long and loudly. But no answer rewarded him, so he took up the food and trudged on towards the summit of the Tor, calling and whistling as he went. Then, with the wind shrieking in his ears and the rain driving against him in sheets out of the invisible storm, the man, his head bent against it, and his face set to the best of his belief towards the natural refuge in the rocks ahead, suddenly felt air beneath his feet instead of earth, and fell headlong into the hole dug by Duckworth two nights previously. The drop had been no great matter in daylight, and taken intentionally, but coming as it did, although Rob broke the fall somewhat by thrusting out an arm, it proved a serious accident. In falling, he twisted round and came to the ground with his left leg doubled beneath him. He knew in a moment that it

was broken; and the unfortunate man also suffered a bad face wound from the stem of his clay pipe which, snapping within his teeth, cut his cheek inside. After the crash of the fall he lay still and dazed for fully twenty minutes under the pitiless beating of the rain. Then his eyes opened, he groaned, pushed out his hands before him, and feebly endeavoured to come at the extent of his injuries.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARGARET IS MYSTIFIED.

FORTUNATELY for himself, Rob Basset was a powerful man, and possessed a stoic temperament and nerves which, without being insensible to such physical agony as that consequent on the breaking of a leg, yet braced themselves to oppose the injury in a manner that had been almost impossible to more highly-strung natures. His placid disposition and customary solidity of mind did not desert him now. Coming slowly to his senses and ascertaining that he had broken his left leg, Rob actually found time for a moment of passing gratification that it was not his right. Then, discovering himself to be under heavy rain, he groped about for the umbrella, reached it, and managed to open it above him. It jammed against the sides of the pit, and

kept his head and body fairly dry. Next he turned his attention to his wounded leg, set his teeth, and lifting it as best he could, got it straight, and put his coat over it. The brandy, which his own forethought had suggested for another, now proved priceless to Rob himself. He drank half the flask at a gulp. Then he made some effort to assume a more comfortable position, and finally remained motionless, his back against one side of the hole. He knew that at best long hours of suffering must lie before him. At worst he might very easily die where he lay. So at least it struck him until reflection proved that he was mistaken.

"A ugly job, sure 'nough," he thought, "not but it might be worse. If one o' them roaming bullocks do come this way an' fall in, same as what I done, then I'm a dead 'un." He reflected that four hours separated him from the possibility of rescue. It was no good raising his voice before that time; and whether the men going to the china-clay works would hear him, muffled as his shouts must be from

underground, was a great question. Presently he remembered the circumstances under which he had come up to Skull Tor, and the recollection completely restored his wonted placid mind. "They knows where I be, anyways. 'Tis only a question o' time," he thought, then settled himself to wait with what patience he could command.

Fortunately for Rob the weather moderated before dawn; by two o'clock the steady patter on his umbrella became intermittent, and finally it ceased. Looking upwards then, he saw two stars visible and an oblong patch of sky, lighter by some degrees than the black frame of the hole above him. The stars stole to the edge of the visible sky and vanished; in twenty minutes a third followed, and when it had likewise disappeared, Rob found himself longing for the twinkle of yet another. They filled his mind in their brief transits, and made him forget a little of the acute pain from which he was suffering. Presently he sat up with some difficulty and slowly scraped the earth

to the depth of half a foot from beneath the injured leg. This alteration of position served slightly to relieve him for a brief period. Then came another star, but it was suddenly blotted out, for the mouth of the hole vanished, seen against clouds as dark as itself. Then the rain began to fall again. It soon ceased, however, and not long afterwards, though the time seemed centuries to the suffering man, a dim perception of light trembled over the gulf above him, and he knew that the dawn was at hand. Rob now endured not a little torment, for he had lain in this plight for three hours. He felt hot and icy cold by turns; the pain of his leg extended to the thigh, and he was also conscious of a strange weight across his forehead and the shooting of sympathetic nerves through every limb. He had husbanded the brandy after his first desperate gulp, and now he meant to wait until he could see how much of it yet remained before he drank more. The grey light slowly grew stronger till he could note blades of grass cutting with serrate edges

one side of his prison, while over the other side hung a broken fern. Then heavy feet made their vibration clearly felt where he lay; a snorting and snuffling came to his ear, and a great head with soft brown eyes in it peered down at him from the world above. It was a bullock, and, seeing beneath him a spectacle absolutely beyond his experience, the beast flung up his tail and galloped off with loud expressions of surprise.

Slowly the light grew whiter, but Basset knew that another hour must still elapse before even the earliest workers would be crossing the moor to their toil. He began counting in sixties, determining thus to measure off the passing of the time; but suddenly, while marking off his estimate of each minute in the wet earth at his side, he stopped, glared at some object which attracted his attention, rubbed his eyes, and glared again.

"Be I awake? Be I dreamin'? Is it the pain o' this here broken leg has got 'pon my brain, or be it real? No, no, real, by God!"

He spoke out loud, then began hastily scratching and scraping the earth back under his leg into the place from which he had removed it. The operation cost him exquisite pain, but he did not delay a moment until he had completed it to his satisfaction; then, racked with torture and yet mightily buoyed up by some mysterious, apparent satisfaction, he spoke again:

"Think o' that—after all these long days, and him workin' by night, I s'pose, never seed it! For that matter, day wouldn't have helped him, for he missed going deep enough by a foot. To be within twelve little inches an' not knaw! 'Tis better than brandy—that!"

Nevertheless, whatever the cause of his wild excitement and exhilaration, he drank the spirits which remained, and was then about to raise his voice and shout, when he stopped, started, and listened.

Somebody else at no great distance from him was calling—calling as loudly as she was able—calling to him.

"Rob! Rob! Rob Basset!" echoed the voice he loved best in the world; and when silence followed, he cried back:

"Daisy! Daisy, dearie! I be here—falled in a gert hole in the ground!"

Margaret it was. After long sleepless hours, the heavy consciousness of something wrong brought her out of bed at the first streak of morning light. The fact that neither of the young men had returned and the great fear of some encounter between them, which had brought disaster or even death to one, and perhaps sent the other flying from a crime, got strong hold upon her; and while she tramped to Skull Tor as fast as her legs would carry her, Margaret's active mind rioted amid various horrid possibilities, and left her almost voiceless upon reaching the scene. In the still uncertain and misty light of early morning, she failed to notice the newly-dug earth not far distant from the head of the Wolf. She only saw the brown expanse of moor streaked with vapour, cheer-

less, sombre, devoid of those colours that the sunrise would presently awaken. Only a single splash of gorse bloom rose ghostly yellow in the grey. Then, lifting up her voice, one name came naturally between her lips, and she cried to Rob. A hawk got off the tor as her words cut the thin, cold air. It slanted swiftly and silently away, and a frightened rabbit lopped hurriedly in the other direction, his white scut glimmering through the wet heather, and vanishing down a hole. Then, from somewhere beneath her feet, as it seemed, came an answering voice, and Margaret heard her own name. She hurried forward, called again, waited for the quick reply, and so, a moment later, stood gazing down, horrified, on her stricken sweetheart.

By the rough steps which Phil had made on one side of the hole to assist him in bringing up his treasure, the girl was able to descend, and this she did. In a few moments Daisy was kneeling beside the injured man, with tears in her eyes and a

thousand questions upon her lips. But Rob cut her short.

"Thank God 'twas you comed and no other. Now do as I bid. No—no—'twasn't no act of Phil's, 'cept that I s'pose he digged this hole what I falled in by night. I haven't seen nought of 'un, nor yet the money, though he's left more 'n ever he took. Aye—that I 'll swear to. He may have got silver, but he's left gold—gold—gold, my dear! An' I 've found it. I 'll tell 'e about that bime-bye. My leg's broke, else I 'd a got out. 'Tis the Lard o' the Manor I must see."

"Oh, my own dear Rob! Your leg broken!"

"Doan't 'e be talkin'. Run along and get the first chaps as you finds gwaine to the works. Tell 'em to bring a hurdle an' ropes. Ropes, mind; I doubt theer 'll be no getting me up wi'out."

"I 'll run like the wind. But you 're not going to die, Rob—say you 're not going to die!"

"Not me, not me; not wi' all my gold. Ha, ha, ha! Fat gold, Daisy, tons an' tons, I 'll lay! Run on, an' the quicker the better. I be half fire an' t' other half ice. But 'tis no odds now—no odds 'tall after I once tells the Lard o' the Manor."

Margaret vanished, and was soon babbling her news to some labourers who trudged towards their work. Intelligence of Rob's disaster served to waken them, and in less than twenty minutes from the girl's departure, three men were above Rob Basset with a long and stout hurdle of the sort used for folding sheep, while another was hastening to the clay-works for a rope. By the time he arrived, however, Rob was out of his prison. It proved possible for two men to descend together and raise him. Then the third got underneath his body, and in this fashion, though not without some jarring and a groan or two which the sufferer was powerless to strangle, they brought him above ground and laid him on the hurdle. Margaret ministered

to him as best she could; but it appeared that his thoughts were wandering, for he spoke no more of his golden discovery below.

"Fill it up, fill it up, while you 'm waiting for the other chap," he said, raising his head which rested on Daisy's lap, and pointing to the hole. "Pitch in some of them clods and lessen the depth of it anyway, else there 'll harm come to the cattle."

"Don't bother about that, my son. Keep quiet and lie still," answered one of his rescuers.

But Rob persisted, and one man who carried a shovel set to work and flung back a few hundredweight of earth into the hole. Strangely enough, the action seemed to calm Basset not a little, and he bore the torture of the start and the steep journey to Meavy without flinching. His rescuer, having seen him into the gate of Woolcrofts, herself went with flying feet and heavy heart for the doctor. As luck would have it, she met the

practitioner of a neighbouring village upon her way, and thus, within half an hour, Rob commanded the best services of two medical men. Together they set the broken bones as far as it was possible to do so under the conditions obtaining. Then they turned their attention to the man's general condition, and did all that lay within their power to help nature.

Assured that there was no reason to suppose that Robert Basset would die, Margaret withdrew and broke down comfortably. She wept to her heart's content, then ate some breakfast, and constituted herself the sick man's nurse from that hour. Farmer Chugg growled and grumbled, but on hearing facts he realised that Rob was the innocent victim of misfortune. He found himself faced with an overwhelming mystery now, and so was Margaret. Mr. Chugg marvelled concerning Phil Duckworth and the money which it was to be presumed he had dug out of the great hole on Skull Tor; while his daughter felt

equally anxious to learn the nature of that priceless treasure that Rob declared still remained there. During the evening, after some good sleep, and blessed by his constitution, the injured man was able to talk a little.

"An' as to the hole 'pon Skull Tor," he said to Daisy, "you just keep dumb, an' doan't say nuthin'. I must speak with Sir Henry Sharland, Lard o' the Manor, an' no less a man. I knaws what I knaws, mind."

"But if there 's money——"

"Not another word 'bout it. 'Tis for the Lard o' the Manor. I must see 'un—I must; then you 'll hear tell of the most wonnerful thing as ever happened in these paarts."

CHAPTER IX.

INSIDE SIR MICHAEL'S BOX.

PHIL DUCKWORTH sat with his treasure in a third-class carriage, watched the orchards and farms, rivers and valleys, slide by the train window behind a torn and flying veil of steam, noted how the parallel ridges in the great fields curved round, like spokes of a giant wheel, as he sped past them, and communed with his soul upon the subject of his future movements and career in London. Not a little uneasiness mingled with his reflections, for though in a fair way to stifle all latent sense of right, as yet Phil had scotched his conscience without quite killing it. He had given it a few hard raps of late days, but the results of youthful education died hard; and now, in the railway train, they wriggled within him and caused passing discomfort. A dose

of sophistry quieted them however. It was easy enough to prove, to himself at any rate, that no man had a better right to the money than had he. Then a burning desire to estimate the extent of his prosperity possessed him. The carriage was empty save for himself and one other passenger who had entered it at Exeter; and now, for the first time, Phil regarded his fellow-traveller, then started with astonishment. In the opposite corner of the carriage sat the little black gentleman of Skull Tor. He was studying a note-book, and had neither noticed nor recognised Phil.

The younger man reflected a moment, then determined not only to speak, but also to explain the nature of the box jammed under the seat below him. Here was one who might tell him the thing he most wanted to know: the value of silver crowns coined in the reign of King Charles I. It occurred to him that they must without question be worth more now than in the days of their circulation. He judged rightly that his story was of a nature

to interest the antiquary not a little, and, wasting no time, therefore, plunged straightway into conversation. Phil began his remarks with an apology for his abrupt and discourteous departure from Skull two days previously; then, into the fascinated ear of Professor Landor, he poured the story of the ancient paper, the enigma and its discovery.

"I 've got the box under this seat now," concluded the speaker. "At Tavistock I took train, wrapped the thing up in newspaper, and am bringing it up to London to have the coin valued for my friend. She is a young lady, and the money is hers."

Thus he put it on the spur of the moment, and the explanation seemed sufficiently reasonable.

"Entrancing, upon my soul! Infinitely gratifying to have met with such an experience! And I helped you—eh? There are those who contend that all knowledge is not useful. Fools! Had I not been familiar with the truth concerning Skull Tor, so to call it, this

treasure must have been under the ground for all time. Well, well, I congratulate you. Will the young lady sell me the original document and glove, think you?"

"Yes, sir," said Phil. "I should say very likely she would."

"So much the better. I already hunger for it. And as to the money, I happen to be a numismatologist of some repute—which means that I am familiar with all matters pertaining to money and coins; though I possess singularly few myself when one comes to consider the wealth of this country. Let us see; let us penetrate the hidden fastnesses of this venerable chest. At least I can put you out of your misery as to the value of what you are carrying with you. The crowns of the Exeter mint, struck at the period with which we are concerned, are, in most cases, undated, while other examples bear date 1644 and 1645. These would be practically new coins at the time Sir Michael wrote this message. As to the value of them, their extrinsic worth varies,

according to the condition and rarity of the individual specimen, from a few shillings to seven pounds."

Phil was busy with a big clasp-knife at the box as Professor Landor spoke.

"Seven pounds!" he gasped; "why, then, there may be money worth fifty thousand pounds here!"

He set to work with increased energy to cut the rusty lock from its wooden bed. The task promised to be easy, for the oak had already rotted round the iron.

"As to money, it may be so—that's a very unimportant side of the question. Think of such a discovery! As a matter of fact, if the market is suddenly flooded with these crowns, their value must diminish. But what does that matter? You may gladden the hearts of a thousand collectors. That should be enough reward for a right-thinking young man. Noble coins. A majestic piece, I assure you, is the earliest Carolean crown. Upon the obverse side you shall find a representation of his

Majesty seated upon horseback, having a diadem on his head, armour upon his body, and a sword in his hand. The design is notably conceived and executed. Then——"

"There's another box inside the first," interrupted Phil.

"Truly, so there is; and sawdust packed between. We must examine that. It may contain a pin, or something of even greater value."

Duckworth now set to work upon the second box, which was fashioned in the likeness of the first, but smaller. In fact, it measured three good inches less in every direction, and by that much Phil's hopes diminished. He worked on, breaking one blade of his knife in his haste.

"Nay, my lad, do not use language of that kind," corrected the Professor. "It avails nothing and means nothing; though if expletive was ever justified, which it never was and never will be, it may be granted that a supreme moment like this allows it. As to

the obverse of the said crown, you will find that it carries an oval shield of arms, garnished, together with the pious motto, 'Christo Auspice Regno.' Ah! what next?" For Phil had the second box open.

"Another—another box," he answered, uneasily. "It can't be some wretched hoax, can it? A man wouldn't have played the fool at such a time as that, I should think."

"Most unlikely. Recollect that the late knight was a scholar and a gentleman; he enjoyed the custody of the rolls also, if what you tell me is true, according to the original document. But remember, young man, that money went considerably farther in those days than it does at present. It may be that a sum which Sir Michael regarded as not small, even humble folks like ourselves shall think nothing of to-day. If he buried as much as five hundred pounds, he had doubtless deemed it no inconsiderable amount. Or it may have been less, but what does that matter? You

must face this discovery in an antiquarian spirit."

But the antiquarian spirit was far from dominating uppermost in Phil Duckworth's mind at that great moment, as the third box was wrenched open and revealed a close packing of coarse crumpled paper. Some of this had writing upon it, some was clean; and the Professor screamed aloud with indignation as Phil began dragging it out and tearing it in his haste.

"Boy, are you mad? You are ill-using precious literary fragments from the time of the first Charles! How dare you?"

His voice was drowned in the chink and jingle of money. The last box contained two compartments, and these were full of great silver pieces. With hands that shook, Phil counted them and arranged them in piles of twenty. Meanwhile, Professor Landor showed much greater interest in the papers which had been used to pack the coin. He was deep in these, grunting and gurgling with satisfaction

the while, when another forcible utterance brought his little eyes up from the papers.

"Swearing again? Really, for one who pretends to any philosophic feeling—for a student——"

"Who wouldn't swear? There are but eight hundred and fifty in all!"

"Didn't I tell you it might be so? Eight hundred and fifty? That represented rather more than two hundred pounds when it was buried. Not but what we may find its value has much increased. You see, money will breed, though a man does hide it in a napkin—that is, if the coin be hidden long enough."

The Professor examined the great crowns carefully, one after another; but as his survey progressed he shook his head. Of the money he made two piles, and when he had finished his scrutiny, which occupied half an hour and was conducted in silence, there lay on the seat before him one large heap of crowns and one small one.

"Apart from the splendid achievement of

this discovery you are not fortunate, young man," he said. "There is plenty of glory for you, but not very much more money than is represented by the intrinsic value of these coins themselves. It happens that most of them are fairly common pieces. The few set aside in the little pile are better, however; for one or two of them you might easily get a five pound note or more. Speaking as an expert, I may say that this money, if properly handled and put into the right channels—to do which will itself cost something—should bring the possessor about three hundred pounds. That is a rather hopeful estimate than not. Why, what 's the matter? You 're quite forgetting the glory. Your name will be in the *Book-Worm*, the *Antiquary*, the *Archæologist*, and all the rest of them. I shall myself write not less than six papers for these journals."

But such a blaze of fame counted very little with Phil. From golden dreams he fell into the dust and ashes of a great disappointment.

Such a shock was keen and tremendous. It left him bewildered, almost helpless. And yet he knew that he deserved no better fortune; that this black discovery was a punishment sufficiently well merited. His brain ran quickly on to the best course of future action. One thing at least seemed transparently clear; there was no wisdom in breaking with his protector at Woolcrofts; it appeared idle to fling over Farmer Chugg and the life of comfort at the farm for three hundred pounds.

Mistaking the young man's gloomy silence, and realising a little of his disappointment, the Professor made a suggestion.

"It happens," he said, "that I know of an appointment which requires filling. The work is for the most part arduous, but if I am not mistaken in you, it would be congenial. A friend of mine, engaged in the construction of a stupendous volume on old cathedral brasses, is at this moment in need of a young and active assistant, whose labours will principally occupy him at the British Museum. The nature of

such research is more or less clerical, but it should enable you to acquire much various and valuable knowledge. Presupposing that you write a good hand, and would be content with a small salary, I am of opinion you will fulfil requirements. My recommendation must undoubtedly secure you the position; and once in touch with books and the countless channels of knowledge open to a sensible young man in the metropolis, your future prosperity should be assured. I say this because, in spite of your language upon two several occasions, I like you. Moreover, I perceive that you are at present labouring under the sorrow of a disappointment."

To this kindly offer Phil returned an immediate answer. His quick mind had been engaged in thought as the Professor spoke, and it struck him that the lie with which he had explained his possession of the money, would answer its purpose as well at Woolcrofts as any other falsehood.

"I 'm sure, if I once get a chance and a

living in London, I should succeed in time," he said, "and I thank you most heartily for doing me such a good turn, sir. I'll give satisfaction if it's in my power to. As for this money, it must go to them who own it. I only found it, and it isn't my own. I'll pack it up and send it with a letter telling them how things are, and what it is worth at best."

This matter was quickly arranged. It happened that Professor Landor was himself returning to Dartmoor some two days later to take some photographs. He designed to secure Sir Michael Strode's manuscript if possible, and as the occasion would take him to Woolcrofts, he offered to carry the money there himself.

"My friend is in a hurry," he said, "and there is no reason why you should not begin your work next week, if you are willing to leave Devon and farmyard labour. Your temporal needs I will be responsible for. There are certain rooms familiar to me, within five minutes' walk of the Museum. These

may be at your service, while a letter of introduction from me to one of the assistant librarians will assist you considerably in your operations."

Thus, within the brief space of two hours, Phil Duckworth's rainbow gold vanished like the dream it was, but in its place a solid possibility faced him. He clung to it with wisdom begot of sharp experience, smothered his discontent and disappointment, and arranged, as the train steamed into Waterloo, to meet his new friend on the morrow at a house in Hammersmith, where dwelt the writer of the stupendous work on old brasses. He had already made it clear to Professor Landor that his departure from Devon was an act accomplished on the spur of the moment.

"I found the money," said he, "and went off to London without telling a soul. I see it was a foolish act, but my wish was to surprise them splendidly. I meant well. Farmer Chugg always was pleased to set a store on

my little learning. He will understand that my motives were high. Nobody else matters."

The antiquary accepted this statement without question; it never once entered his head to doubt the young man's honesty of purpose and singleness of heart. Later on, in the privacy of his chamber, the old man even found it in his mind to sympathise with Phil's disappointment.

"He is young," thought the Professor, "and he was doing this thing for the girl who owns that precious paper. It is hardly conceivable that either of them could attach more importance to the money than the document itself; yet there might have been some sexual emotion. I can only pray that the young woman will see her way to parting with the manuscript. When she learns what I have done for the youth it may weigh with her, if there should luckily chance to exist any sentiment in her mind of a tender nature towards him. That being so, even the transient disorder called love will have resulted in a

tangible advantage for once. And I shall be the prodigious gainer. At this moment I can think of nothing which would give me greater personal satisfaction than the possession of this document. Yet, surely no human being in her senses—even a milkmaid—would willingly part from such a thing."

CHAPTER X.

ROB GETS HIS THOUSAND POUNDS.

TWO days passed at Woolcrofts and a theory, not far distant from the truth, was spreading as to the disappearance of Phil Duckworth. Rob's father had first bluntly proclaimed it, and though Farmer Chugg chose to be extremely angry at the time, yet private reflection convinced him that the state of affairs gave sufficient colour to such a suggestion.

"He 've digged up the money an' runned away with it—any fool can see how 'tis. You 'll never hear no more of 'un, farmer, an' so it ban't no use worritin'. Us all makes mistakes, an' you made a mistake when you set such store 'pon thicky bwoy."

Thus Mr. Basset, senior, described Phil's disappearence and continued absence; but Peter Chugg found it difficult to believe such

things were possible. The discovery of his missing wheelbarrow in a ditch just outside Tavistock went far to convince him, however; and the blow of such ingratitude made the old man hang his head and look years older than usual.

Events at this moment swept interest from Phil's affair, and when Professor Landor arrived one morning, asked for some refreshment, and brought a stout packet from the open carriage which had conveyed him, his subsequent information went far towards lifting the cloud from the farmer's mind. He gladly accepted the story of Phil's actions as true; he readily pictured him as hoping to arrange a splendid surprise for Margaret; and he sorrowed not a little to think that the noble youth was lost to Woolcrofts—at any rate, for years to come. But the spectacle of Phil engaged upon hard work cheered him, and the more so because his old dream of a union between the young man and his daughter was now finally shattered.

"I lay he 'll perform gert things; and us 'll often see his doin's in print, awnly give him time," declared Farmer Chugg. "Theer 's genius in 'un, an' I 've always held to it as he wasn't made o' common stuff same as us."

To Margaret, her eight hundred and fifty crowns and the prospect of being able to turn them into three hundred pounds was far from a disappointment, after all. She, too, accepted the Professor's statements with an open heart; and if a doubt crossed her mind of Phil's strict honesty in the affair, she put it away as ungenerous and unjust. That Duckworth had gone out of her life and Rob come back into it was joy sufficient for the day. She could well afford to be kind to the young man who had departed. And kind Daisy was, for she begged the Professor take back with him not less than two hundred of the recovered crowns.

"'Tis fair an' just," said she; "he found them wonderfully, though but for you, sir, he never would have done it."

"All knowledge is useful," said Professor Landor; then, with some timidity, he approached the subject of Sir Michael Strode's document. To his extreme gratification Margaret made no demur.

"You 've done a deal more for me, sir, than you might think," she said; "Phil Duckworth digged the hole, you see, because you helped him to find the exact spot to dig it. Then somebody else, seeking for Phil by night, fell into the hole and broke his leg, dear fellow. But lying there in the dawn, he discovered that though Phil had found silver on Skull Tor, he left gold behind him. You might like to see Rob Basset before you go? 'Tis an amazing story altogether."

Professor Landor gladly consented to visit the sufferer. Rob was prospering well, and the realisation of his hopes the previous night had gone far to assist his recovery. He may tell the end of the story of the Scorpion's Heart, for rightly it belongs to him.

"Daisy found me, you see, an' thought as

my wild words was just ravin'; but 'tweern't so 'tall, maister. I axed an' prayed to see the Lard o' the Manor, 'cause I 'd got a wonnerful gert secret for his ear an' none other. But they thought I was just weak in the head, an' put me off an' off. Then, yester marnin', as gude luck had it, Sir Henry Sharland hisself went ridin' through Meavy town; an' Daisy spoke to 'un. 'Of course I 'll see him,' he sez, bein' gentle every way an' kind to all, large an' small. So he gets off his horse an' comes up-long an' holds of my hands, an' sez, 'Well, my good man, what can I do for 'e?' an' I sez, ''Tis something braave for your Lardship as I be gwaine to do.' He, thinkin' I was just a poor droozlin' fule, smiles an' pretends he 's ever so obliged. Then I sez, 'I 've found china-clay on Skull Tor! The signs is theer, only 'bout ten feet from the surface.' Then he sits up an' takes me serious. Not that he would b'lieve it, even then. ''Tis one of the volcanic tors wi' granite on it. I reckon there 's no clay there,' he sez. 'You 'll find a

gert hole nigh the rocks 'pon top of it. Dig an' see for yourself,' I sez. 'So I will then,' he sez, 'and that before the day's much older.' So he rides off theer an' then, to the china-clay works up-along, two miles or more from Skull Tor. He gets a few chaps wi' shovels an' picks, an' they sets to work bottom o' the hole where I laid that night; he kept 'em at it till there weern't no manner o' doubt an' the stuff shawed butivul, in a way that a child could onderstand. He gave the chaps what digged a gold sovereign for their trouble, then rode off so cheerful as a grasshopper, an' comed in an' seed me again.

"'Did 'e find it, Sir Henry?' I sez. 'No,' he sez, 'you did. You bin an' done it to rights, my son, this journey,' he sez, or some such words as them, 'an' I be gwaine to give 'e a thousand pounds for your trouble, an' much good may it do 'e.' An' much good it did do, as Miss Margaret here will allow."

"Ah! a most interesting modification of the elvan ingredients is that which transforms

felspar into kaolin, or china-clay. It is discovered—but there! of course you know as much—perhaps more—about it than I do. And you young creatures are attached to one another! Positively this is romance of a fascinating sort," declared the amiable Professor. "Now I had suspected," he continued, "that it was the young man in London——"

"Nothing of the kind, at all," said Daisy hastily.

"Exactly. It shows how easily one may be mistaken."

"Ess fay! an' farmer—he's withdrawn all obstacle now, for a thousand pounds was the mark he set 'pon his darter. No wan was to have her what couldn't put down that awful pile o' money."

"I 'm sure I 'm very delighted to have been the least indirect service in such an admirable disposal of events," said Professor Landor, pressing the priceless packet he had now buttoned up safely beneath his coat. "If I had it in my power to give you another

thousand pounds for this ancient document, which is responsible for these magic results in your lives, I would so; but it unfortunately happens that I have not a thousand pounds in the world."

"We 've got to thank you for my riches all the same, 'pears to me," said Rob.

"To some extent, but you must not forget our mutual friend, Mr. Philip Duckworth. Him I have been happily instrumental in assisting too, and doubt not that when he hears of this fairy-like falling out of affairs—his delight will know no bounds."

"I 'm sure I hope 'twill be as you say, sir," answered Margaret.

THE END OF "THE HEART OF THE SCORPION."

The Transit of the Red Dragon.

CHAPTER I.

PANIC.

PEACEFUL in the midst of chaos, self-possessed at the very heart of a world gone mad, there sat a gigantic man hard by the church door of St. Gudule. His watchful eyes flashed at the spectacle before him; his ear drank in the rumble and roar of a thousand harsh throats; and he showed one shining, canine tooth in a sneer, and proceeded with his labour, which was the polishing of a sword.

Summer clouds, piled up in sunny crests and pinnacles against the August blue, mimicked, with aerial splendour, the towers

and turrets of a city which lay spread beneath them. The shadows of the clouds swept onward over Brussels, casting flying interspaces of purple gloom on red roofs and fantastic gables; on open places of the mart; on great squares set aside for pomp and pleasure; on gold-capped spires, fretting the sky with gauzy wonders of workmanship; on that crowning Gothic miracle where, to a vane full four hundred feet above the Town House, there leapt aloft a magic vision of Brussels lacework frozen into stone.

And, between the cloud-shadows, early morning sunshine brightened the fair capital of Brabant, added a gleam of gold to the harvests ripening without the city walls, set the air dancing in the narrow, gabled streets, and made a frenzied populace seek the shade.

Now the man polished his long sword near St. Gudule's Church door more than three hundred years ago; and though summer sunlight has grown no cooler during the

interval of time, yet another famous heat-dispensing centre may certainly be considered to have suffered some diminution of temperature, for Hell was deemed hotter by many degrees when Philip II. of Spain tortured the Netherlands than it is at present.

In the days of this narrative that most "débonair and gentle" devil of a monarch was hourly tightening his grip on an unhappy country; his holy Inquisition roasted, robbed, and racked all of the reformed faith; the demoniac Peter Titelmann rode rough-shod over human life and human liberty; while the cumbrous but comprehensive machinery of a most damnable persecution thundered, like Juggernaut's car, through the length and breadth of the Netherlands.

Then, during a brief interval, the country hoped that better times lay in store. Cardinal Granvella departed, while the Regent Duchess, Margaret of Parma, breathed a sigh of satisfaction upon his downfall, and felt her own power the safer. For a moment the persecution

of the heretics was lulled, and a day came when the reformers, rapidly gaining strength, struck their first blow back, in that iconoclastic outburst which began at Antwerp, during the Prince of Orange's absence, and spread, as the sea over a broken dyke, to Ghent, to Tournay, to Valenciennes. The furious beggars' cry, "Vivent les gueux!" roared like a hurricane through the sacred places; temple after temple was robbed of all its beauties; thousands of marble saints, hundreds of priceless pictures, were torn from niche and wall in one terrific massacre of Art.

And now, under the summer clouds, rose a murmur of pending rebellion in Brussels itself. Every heretic stood an inch higher for the news from Valenciennes; panic ran like fire through the Palace; while Madame of Parma, despite her moustache and iron will, proved a woman at heart—and a very frightened woman. The humming of the hornet heretics had in truth an ugly sound,

and not a few Catholics were already flown, while as for the priests, they trembled before their sanctuaries.

Against which stormy background stood grimly out the giant soldier, rubbing rust from his blade. He sat before his own house-door, and if he trembled it was with anger.

This man belonged to the conquerors, and his extraordinary size rendered him remarkable apart from the massive strength and defiant carriage of his head. A famous peculiarity of some among Raphael's Madonnas might have been observed in Feria Manrique's eyes: pupil and iris seemed of one hue only, a flashing black; while, for the rest, his face was brown as a roasted coffee-bean, his inky hair and beard were already grizzled. From time to time the soldier of Spain listened to an unquiet droning of distant crowds hurrying this way and that; then he returned to his labour and continued to polish the long sword. Other armour stood

beside him, and, notable amongst the pieces, were a helmet, with open casque, and a long Spanish breastplate of the sort called "peascod."

Manrique, as he rubbed the well-known armourer's mark at his blade-hilt, addressed words to the weapon:

"I never counted to have taken thee from thy scabbard more, save in play. Juan de Tora made thee at Toledo—made thee to drink soldiers' blood, as thou hast; and now thy point, that ripped the life out of fighting men where the legend roamed, seems like to prick the doublets of base mechanics and this Netherlandish vermin, making stir from their holes like angry rats. Of a truth, faggots had been better, or the hangman's hemp—not a soldier's steel. Thou that hast let the spirit out of heroes, art in sore case to play the part of a mere devil's prong, for damned souls. And yet, methinks, if the churches be in danger, 'tis well, in God's name, thou shouldst grow bright again. The enemy of the Most

High—the destroyer of the sacred images of the saints—is food for thee, hero or slave."

He rubbed the great blade as he spoke: few of the Royalists and Catholics felt such little fear as he; yet no more than others did he know what the maddened people would do that day. More than fifty thousand men, women, and children had already perished under Spanish edicts, yet the hardy reformers still dared call their souls their own; and now all of Brussels who had inclined their ears to the new doctrines from Switzerland and Germany were alive and abroad, fired with the reports of the image-breaking elsewhere.

A party of Netherlanders and Walloons tramped singing and shouting past Manrique as he polished his armour. They cast sour looks at the steel, but did not molest the soldier, and, while he spat and crossed himself, they tramped onward, led by a greasy, red-capped giant clad in leather and bearing a

great sledge upon his shoulder. Behind him followed members of all those fifty-two guilds into which Brussels' artisans were at that time divided. The gardeners carried their picks, the armourers their hammers, the weavers and tapestry-makers—they whose gorgeous fabrics made Europe wonder—pressed forward, with clothiers and mercers, upon their more warlike leaders. All were in deadly earnest, and the insurrection grew amain. As yet no voice from the States-General had sounded: panic began to set the heart of the city palpitating dangerously, and even his enemies thanked God that the Prince of Orange was in Brussels. If any human voice could save the impending catastrophe it was "Father William's"; and while Manrique polished his sword, with purpose to take up arms against the people as soon as might be, Orange, Egmont, Horn, and other noble seigneurs were exhausting their powers of argument and persuasion on the Duchess. She designed to fly from the Palace to Mons; and since three in the morning the

great lords had been urging her to abandon so weak a resolution.

Manrique turned to his work as the clatter of the mob died away; but a minute later a horse's hoofs clanged on the cobble-stones, and looking up he beheld no less a man than Count Mena de Velasco—a chamberlain of the Court and an individual at that time in high favour with Armenteros, the Duchess's right hand. Mena de Velasco was, upon every count, a tolerable rascal—a power withal, and a petty statesman whose familiarity with Macchiavelli's doctrines qualified him handsomely for the conduct of minor devilries and small intrigues; but one whose intellect was not of a strength to cope with any concern of moment. The Count had a guard of two men-at-arms, and Manrique exchanged a word with them while they looked with some approval at the old soldier's operations. Then, to his surprise, the Count pulled up, and in a moment had dismounted. His business was evidently with Feria Manrique.

"The heretics have drawn thy sword from his sheath, Manrique?" inquired the grandee, with a sharp look at the soldier.

"Aye, my lord. Its scabbard is no place for a Spaniard's sword while we live in this land."

"And yet the King gave thee a special licence to put it up for ever, and also filled thy purse?"

"True, my good lord. His godlike Majesty suffered me to eat the bread of idleness. It may be thou knowest the fame of the despatch I bore from Cardinal Granvella even to the Court of Spain — how, though grievously maimed and stripped to the skin by the King's enemies, I yet came safely off; neither did any man's eye see the secret packet till it lay before the King alone?"

"Truly, Manrique, 'tis the fame of that magic exploit hath brought me hither. Thou art, as I think, a right Catholic; but is it true thou hast a wife of the Walloons?"

"I had, Seigneur, but she died long since

in her bed at Mons. There, by the King's bounty, I dwelt ere I came to Brussels; and now my soul sickens at the ungodly savour of these damnable heresies that draw this land to hell, and I would fain fight again or turn my back and hasten home to die where I was born, in Castile."

"And now, Manrique, is it true that the secret of your achievement transpired not, and that no man, his Majesty alone excepted, ever learned how thou hadst performed a feat that seemed hardly less than a miracle?"

"Not so, my lord; the King was no exception. I offered him my secret, but he would none of it. 'Nay, friend,' quoth he, piercing me with the eyes once seen never to be forgotten. 'Nay—keep thy trick a secret. It may serve thee again; and, for me, I have mysteries enough of my own breeding. Depart in peace with thy reward, and let no man have right to demand of thee the secret by which thou has thus served thy King.'"

"But how like you the thought of making

good his Majesty's prophecy? There 's work for thee at the Palace waiting thy word. The Duchess flies to Mons within an hour, for I much doubt whether 'tis in the power of Admiral Horn, Count Egmont, or even the Prince, to modify her determination. And with her will travel the Court and notable dames and high ladies not a few. Now, from much dismay and confusion incidental to this present terror, ariseth an enterprise, and 'tis from the Countess de Mirando I am come."

Manrique's dark eyes sparkled.

"I have fought under her lord," he said.

"She knows it well, and likewise the special fame of your adventure with the despatch. Therefore she bids me to seek you. The Countess hath a marvellous fine diamond of European repute. 'Tis a gem indeed worth untold gold, and no such jewel ever yet glimmered in this cursed country. The stone was gotten in Mexico by Count de Mirando's father; and now, being in no small fear from the future, the Countess desires to despatch

this 'Red Dragon,' for so is her diamond called, privately and securely to Mons. Her husband is like to arrive in that city by to-morrow even, and she greatly pines to know the stone is once again in his keeping; for, as I say, the trinket is priceless. A King's ransom lies hid in the bulk thereof. Further, and thou bring the 'Dragon' in safety to Mons, two hundred ducats will reward thee."

"Ducats of silver or gold?"

"Golden pieces, every one."

Manrique reflected a moment and looked thoughtfully at the pointed brown beard, shifty brown eyes, and rich silken cap of his visitor. Then he spoke:

"Methinks the Countess suffers this passing terror something to dim her Castilian courage, Count. 'Tis true these pestilent Calvinists are doing Satan's work in the holy places, so that Antwerp already stinketh with their sins, neither hath the thrice blessed figure of Our Lady, God's Virgin Mother, escaped the blasphemous claws of them. But 'tis not

imputed to these wretches that they have appropriated gold or silver to their own base ends. Though gems and precious stones have been swept together upon the church floors, yet not so much as the jewelled eye of a Saint hath been reported stolen. Therefore, if God so wills, and Brussels anon shall suffer this scourge, it is not to be supposed that violence will fall on man or woman. None need fear for their own, but only God and the Saints, who will make war in their own good time and strike the last blow."

Count Velasco showed considerable indignation at this speech, and answered with no little heat at the end of it.

"Of a truth, sirrah," said he, "it ill becomes thee to think for thy betters thus. Art thou wiser than the Duchess, or canst thou gauge the fury of this mad Brussels better than I?"

"Nay, my lord," answered the soldier stoutly; "but are not the noblest in the land of my mind? Truly it is bruited on humble

tongues that the Prince of Orange and others only less great are loud and instant that her Grace leave not the Palace."

"Have a care, friend, and give no heed to all thou hearest. It is possible to be a mighty seigneur and yet no friend of Spain. Beware and keep a still tongue. Know that it is I myself who have urged the Countess de Mirando to this step. Full well I know the unexampled worth of the 'Red Dragon,' and have much feared for it as I noted the jewel flashing, like a crimson star, on the lady's fair forefinger. Therefore no more words but only 'yea' or 'nay.'"

"'Tis surely 'yea' for a dame of the Mirandos of Castile. I pray only that no effort be made to take from me the secret King Philip himself suffered me to lock up in my bosom; and I need say only further that this 'Dragon of Mexico,' so to call him, must himself decide my final action."

"How so, Manrique?" inquired Velasco, showing some interest.

"Chiefly touching the size thereof, my lord."

"Most surely the jewel will occupy no such space as did the Cardinal's despatch?"

Manrique smiled.

"Ah, my good Seigneur, but who can say, save only Manrique, what space the despatch *did* occupy?"

"Well, no more words. 'Tis fifty good miles to Mons, and I would have you start under cover of night. A full moon will be your guide, and your business being secret, no molestation is likely to fall on you."

"As to that a thousand foes might indeed rob me of my life, but they would not be any nearer my secret, Count."

"Say you so?" asked the other curiously. "Then set we forth to the Palace that you may see the gem for yourself. And gird thy armour on, Manrique, for the hour grows unruly, and four Spanish blades are better than three."

The soldier obeyed, and as he presently

set forth with the other men-at-arms, his blood raced and tingled to feel once again the weight of pauldrons on his shoulders, of tassets against his thighs. The three soldiers strode together before the Count's horse, and an insolent crowd growled about them from time to time but kept safe distance.

It was the heretics' little hour of triumph. All men may well deplore the brief, unworthy madness that did ill service to a noble cause; but in the light of subsequent punishment the crime dwindles mightily. Too soon Alva's awful shadow was to blast and blacken that land; too soon his Council of Blood would devour what the Inquisition had left; too soon thousands of men, women, and babes were to die in a thousand agonies, and the shattered dolls and saintly relics, the statues, and stained glass, be horribly avenged.

CHAPTER II.

AT THE PALACE.

COUNT MENA DE VELASCO and his guard approached the ancient Palace of the Dukes of Brabant, at that time the residence of the Court. His little party entered a square before this building, and pushed its way through some wild scenes of confusion, haste, and fear. Serving-men were toiling; huge stage coaches, many with six stout Flemish steeds already harnessed to them, were only waiting the royal word to start for Mons; and from the windows of more than one great vehicle fair, frightened faces already peeped. Sumpter mules squealed and kicked under their loads, and the court-yard was full of a mingled crowd, mostly Spanish. Soldiers waited the word of command; drivers, footmen, horsemen, and the

whole extensive cavalcade which was to accompany the Duchess were now in readiness. Her coach waited, and every moment a new rumour ran through the great company that she was coming; while outside high iron railings, which surrounded the square, many hundreds of the more peaceful burghers of Brussels had assembled themselves to watch, as from the auditorium of a theatre, the changing scene and the reigning terror.

Dismounting at a side entrance, Count de Velasco gave his horse to a soldier, and, accompanied by Manrique, passed quickly into the great hall of the Palace, that noble chamber where eleven short years before Charles V. made his famous abdication on behalf of Philip. Now the members of the States-General occupied it. Order was dead: every man spoke to his neighbour; and all waited with the utmost anxiety to learn the result of a private conference still maintained in the presence of the Duchess by Orange and other great lords.

The Count, hearing that doubt and uncertainty still ruled every heart, pushed forward, with Manrique at his heels. He threaded his way through sundry corridors, across a large apartment or two—all empty save for scared conclaves of lacqueys—and then knocked at a door, and, after brief delay, was admitted.

It was Dorothea, Countess de Mirando herself who welcomed him, and Manrique smiled within his helm to see a fair lady of the Castilian type—the land he loved best in the world.

Donna Dorothea was a dark beauty, but fear, though brightening her eyes, had not a little dimmed the lustre of her sun-kissed cheek. She came forward anxiously, and Count de Velasco, plunging without delay into the matter, explained that Manrique was willing to bear the "Red Dragon" to Mons.

"Then it is well," said she, "and I rate his valour high, for all men know the King hath crowned Manrique with laurel, and made him free of steel. Yet I perceive his mail is

not rusted and still becomes him. Truly, Manrique, the Count, my husband—a name not unknown to you—will reward you well."

"Madame," said the old soldier, "he that serves you is not ill paid if he hear but his mistress's voice in thanks. And truly I ne'er fought under a more glorious master than the Count. Now I pray that I may address certain words to your ladyship's ear alone, for——"

"I want not thy secret, Manrique," said the lady abruptly. "It is enough that you undertake the charge."

"Nay, gracious Madame, nor am I like to impart what the King himself has suffered me to keep hidden from all men. But precaution is better than caution in affairs, and, as in the occasion of my mission with the Cardinal's despatch, I left to one man full directions how to act under certain circumstances, so now I would leave the like for the better safety of this great red diamond."

The Countess regarded Velasco, who seemed

loath to take the hint. Finding he made no offer to retire, she invited him bluntly to do so, whereupon he obeyed but with ill grace.

"Hasten your confabulations, Madame," said he, "for time presses, and I desire to furnish Manrique with sundry particulars concerning the road I would have him pursue to Mons. Moreover, with profound respect, I aver that Count de Velasco, your husband's dearest friend and former companion in arms, takes it unkindly to be shut from any concern having the 'Red Dragon's' safety for its object."

The lady's eyes flashed strangely at this speech, and she answered:

"Your friendship for my husband, Count, hath already appeared curiously. To-morrow, if God wills, I myself shall meet the Count in Mons, and may then relate how great a friendship you bear him. Enough of that. You have his authority to control my action in certain matters and 'tis your will this stone depart secretly to Mons. It shall do so; but

the messenger is of my own choosing, therefore depart and leave me in his company."

Manrique, feeling within the breath of some disturbance which concerned him not, walked to the window and looked out upon the scene below. A moment afterwards Count de Velasco had left the apartment, and, save for two chamberwomen who stood at the further extremity of it and beyond earshot, the soldier found himself alone with his new mistress. Then in quick, low accents the Countess spoke :

" Manrique, thou art, as I think, a Castilian, and in this plaguey land of eternal rain and eternal heresies, 'tis sweet to see those of that."

" Madame, you may trust me with your life."

" But this is a far greater thing. For my part, I let the diamond go unwillingly. 'Twould surely be safe hid in my own bosom, for these Netherlanders, though they bluster and prate, would never dare to lay

hand upon the Duchess or her retinue betwixt here and Mons. However, Velasco hath power to direct my judgment. He is my husband's friend, and he hath declared my diamond in danger, and insisted upon it that the stone leave Brussels. He hath further urged that to one of his own mercenaries the gem should be entrusted; but I, minding me of thy fame and mistrusting the unknown, chose that yours should be the task if you proved willing."

"You were wise, Madame; and out of the love I cherish towards the Count, I will serve you with all my heart. But first the measure of precaution I named. May it please your maidens to place ink, quill, and paper before me, and I will set down a form of words, only to be read by thee shouldst thou hear I have not reached Mons."

Writing materials were furnished him, and the Countess was amazed to see the man had made no idle boast when he said that he could write. Laboriously he penned a line or two,

then sealed the packet with wax, and handed it to Donna Dorothea.

"If I come not to thy lord at Mons, break up this, Madame; but should I reach the Count in safety, then I would have you burn it unread."

She promised to obey, and at the same time the arras tapestries which hung six feet high around the walls of the chamber were pushed aside, and Velasco entered at a door opposite that from which he had taken his departure.

"The seigneurs still strive with her Grace," he announced, "and vehemently urge her by all holy things to abandon her contemplated departure and remain in Brussels. President Viglius hath announced that the citizens hold the seven gates. The old man's knees shake in his robe of office and he weeps amber, like a sea-fowl. Admiral Horn hath sworn to cut a road out of Brussels at daylight to-morrow if the Duchess will but wait events till then. Indeed, all men pray her to abide here for four-and-twenty hours."

"Mayhap the silver tongue of Orange will bate her first intention," said the Countess; but Velasco refused to credit such a suggestion.

"Build not upon it," he said. "Any moment may see the Court on its way to Mons. Meanwhile the 'Red Dragon' of the Mirandos must quit Brussels ere evil betide. The responsibility is on my shoulders, and I would it were not so. You can trust Manrique, lady?"

"Ay, Seigneur, for his heart first beat in Castile, his eyes have mirrored the mountains of Toledo; he hath seen my home. Ah, Mirando! Mirando!" she cried, a flush brightening her cheek and a mist rising in her eyes, "would that thou wert this good, honest man's goal rather than Mons, and I his charge instead of this red Mexican stone!"

She turned to a bureau as she spoke, unlocked it, and brought forth a little round, black, ivory casket, about two inches in height and with the circumference of a penny-piece.

At sight of it Manrique shook his head.

"I cannot assure the safety of a concern so

bulky," he declared; give me your diamond and that will be safe, but if ill fall upon this ivory receptacle I hold myself unblamed."

Opening her little casket, the Countess displayed that historic treasure it contained; and even Manrique, little prone to see matter for wonder in anything, was struck with great admiration at the spectacle of an extraordinary diamond alive to its core with light, fire, and wondrous brilliance—a living, palpitating drop of pure adamant, clear as crystal, with every facet a star. The diamond, though not really red, had an infinitely fine rose-pink hue, and it was set in the bezel of a heavy gold ring.

"'Tis thus I picture an angel's tear," said Donna Dorothea.

Velasco took it from the Countess and exhibited it to Manrique, who examined the glorious stone carefully without speaking for some moments.

"This diamond," said he at length, "must be removed from its golden mounting."

The lady gave permission, and Velasco, with

a little left-handed dagger, pricked the diamond from out the ring, putting the stone in the ivory box and giving both to Manrique, while at the same time he returned the gold setting to its owner.

The soldier now consented to be absolutely responsible for the diamond, but his mistress asked another question before he departed, and Manrique noted that the Count listened, not without interest, to his answer.

"Pardon a woman's curiosity, Manrique," said the Countess, as he was about to retire, with the "Red Dragon" safe in its ivory case beneath his breastplate; "forgive a woman, and tell me this much. Can it be thou wilt dare to swallow the 'Dragon?' I ask for thy good. One did so long years agone and perished miserably."

"Nay, Countess, for in truth it were death to swallow this creature of razor-edges. 'Twould surely stick fast in some organ vital to existence and so make an end of me. Your 'Red Dragon' would of a surety slay any who

offered to him the hospitality of his belly. Moreover, the sword of a foe might make rough quest and find it there."

So saying, Manrique bowed low and took his leave. Count de Velasco accompanied him, having somewhat to say and that pertinent. He directed Manrique to set forth at midnight by way of the Caudenberg gate, gave him at the same time a password, and then bid him be gone.

"Recollect that speed is above all essential," was the Count's last advice. "Take the fleetest steed thou knowest, and burden not thyself with much metal to retard thy progress. Thy mission is a secret, and thou wilt not be molested."

Velasco also directed a route; but Manrique knew the way to Mons sufficiently well, and mentioned a shorter road tending through lonely passes upon the confines of Hainaut.

Then he withdrew, and an hour later was back in his home under the double towers of the Church of St. Gudule.

Manrique's preparations were soon made. He bid the Flemish woman who saw to his needs prepare a meal better than common and have it ready for him at dusk. Then he saw to private affairs and collected what money he had. He dwelt in a single room at Brussels, this sufficing for his requirements; and now, as he stirred himself here, something told the man he would never see the place again. Nor did that trouble him over-much. On returning from the Palace and issuing an order or two, he put off his mail, locked himself into his little room, and was invisible for some hours. The mistress of the house heard the slow rasping of a file when she stopped at the door to listen.

The day drew to its close, while as yet no sort of outrage had fallen on the city. The burghers and the seigneurs were gaining confidence; and, lifting up their voices, the order-loving merchants and nobles of Brussels blessed the Prince of Orange in that his words had weighed with Duchess Margaret, his presence

served to prevent, as by a charm, the threatened rebellion.

During that afternoon Manrique visited a friend, and hired a great grey Flemish mare of vast bone and muscle. The massive beast was also accounted a swift traveller for those days, and she had oftentimes carried mailed men. Indeed, during the previous December, in that famous jousting which followed on Prince Alexander of Parma's wedding with the Princess Maria of Portugal, the grey mare had borne herself right handsomely in the lists.

CHAPTER III.

THE BLACK MASKS.

FROM the Caudenberg gate of Brussels, Feria Manrique rode forth an hour before midnight on the 22nd day of August, 1566. He had not followed Count de Velasco's advice in every particular, for, though his helmet was exchanged for a cap of cloth and a heavy woollen doublet covered his body, yet the soldier's steel breastplate lay beneath his innocent raiment, and the sword he had polished that morning with such industry now hung suspended from his side.

The road—wild and lonely enough for the most part—was not unfamiliar to Manrique. He felt contented and happy. Nigh a pound of fine pasty and a bottle of red wine comforted his stomach, while thoughts of the golden ducats warmed his heart. The night

air was cool after the heat of the day; the great grey mare jogged comfortably forward; a golden summer moon hung large and low above the horizon, and promised good store of light anon. Slowly she climbed aloft, filling the valley of the Senne with radiance, and brightening into fairy silver the mists that wound upon the river's banks. A mighty silence reigned, broken only by the ubiquitous music of the corncrakes in the fields or the muffled boom of a bittern from the marshes. Then, floating from Brussels along the placid bosom of the Senne and rising magically from the reflected moon upon the water, there came music of distant bells chiming midnight. By that hour Manrique had already put two good leagues between the city and himself; and there were left before him some forty miles yet to travel. Skirting the plains whereon a generation as yet unborn would fight the battle of Waterloo, Manrique presently parted from the winding river and entered a flat, drear region where moonlight glimmered in

ashy streaks over wildernesses of marsh and morass. Here suddenly the man reigned in his horse, crossed himself, and growled a prayer. Lights were rising and falling and beckoning out of the dank mists. They danced a devil's gallop, waxing and waning as marsh fires will; and Manrique, sweating under his steel, thanked the Holy Virgin for having sent such moonlight. He soon passed the kingdom of these flickering exhalations, and not long afterwards the character of his road changed once more. Little hills now rose ahead, and the great grey mare, breasting into cooler air, snorted, stretched her neck, and pushed forward. Manrique felt the spring of her mighty thighs behind him as the hill grew steeper, and anon led man and horse to a tract of rocks and pine-trees, with precipitous slopes subtending their track on either side. Now the rider knew he was nearing Hainaut, and had completed the half of his journey.

Through a rugged region of stony hillocks, capped with black silhouettes of scanty firs,

he kept his way, now uphill into the moonlight, now down, where inky shadows hid the bottoms of steep ravines. The road proved none of the best, and these sudden, repeated plunges into profound gloom caused his steed much uneasiness; but Manrique was a fine horseman and feared no physical catastrophe. With firm hand and kind voice he soothed the mare, pushed her steadily along, and kept his eyes about him the while. Though moonlight had served him so well in the low lands, it was a source of trouble here. It played strange pranks with the rocks and crags, threw abrupt and monstrous shadows at sharp corners, and greatly troubled the man, for, despite his bright eyes, his sight was none of the best.

But it was not the startling transitions from light to darkness which nearly brought a disaster. Manrique had been listening for some time to a curious echo from the low cliffs on his right hand, and now he slackened rein for a second, his mind being fixed on

hearing the answering sound of his own horse's hoofs. At this critical moment two owls, white and silent as moonbeams, shot across the path, and the mare, resenting this unseemly surprise, started with extreme abruptness for so large a beast. Luckily no harm befell, but the accident led Manrique to a curious discovery. He had uttered a warning shout to his steed when she reared, but, though the echo rang back every hoof-stroke with regularity, it took no count of the rider's sudden cry. He stopped and there was no sound; he rode forward and the muffled rattle as of another rider fell upon his ear again.

Musing over the mystery, Manrique kept warily upon his way, but after proceeding a furlong further his doubts were solved, and suddenly, right ahead of him, where a second before was naught but moonlight, there appeared another horseman—a magic apparition, fashioned, as it seemed, of ebony and silver. Not until Feria Manrique had ridden boldly forward to where the spectral

man and horse were standing did his heart cease thumping at his ribs, old campaigner though he was. Flesh and blood and metal, whether steel or lead, had never scared him, but superstition held his soul in iron hands, so that misty creatures bred of night and moon were a sort of foes he cared little to meet.

On reaching the strange rider, however, Manrique noted a winding path bending downward from the wooded heights above him, while another moment served to explain what mystery remained, for the horseman spoke, proclaiming himself for a Spaniard, and evidently desiring to be thought an honest man.

"Well found, friend! By heaven, a lonely road and a difficult."

"True," answered the soldier, his fears vanished, his caution awake: "so difficult, friend, and so lonely withal that strangers will do wisely to keep each his distance from the other. Lead on, if this be your way; if not,

back your steed a pace and suffer me to pass by."

"I am bound for Mons," answered the other, "and we are now, as I judge, within the borders of Hainaut. Art thou one who hast fled before the cloud that threatens Brussels? Such, I own, am I."

"For me, I too am bound towards Mons. Lead on and I will follow thee."

The stranger obeyed, and proclaimed hearty satisfaction at thus unexpectedly meeting a fellow-countryman. "I counted on no such fortune," he said once and again.

The road thereabout led through great darkness, and it was impossible for the soldier to determine whether his companion was armed; but by his easy speech he put him down for a man of quality, and, presently, was fain to judge him honest also. The stranger cursed all Netherlanders in good set terms, wished every heretic in hell, and showed through other matters of conversation a sound judgment and most just discretion. Neither

did he make any secret of his own affairs. Don Galyn—for so he called himself—was returning to Spain ere long, having failed in certain ventures of merchandise. The moonlight presently showed him to be a small man, mounted on a steed shorter by a hand and a half than the beast Manrique bestrode. He was armed only with a light rapier, and scrupled not to confess a physical cowardice, at that time most rare in any man of breeding, and, when met with, held disgraceful. The soldier declared his trade, greatly to his comrade's gratification; but though Don Galyn appeared well content to be garrulous and livened the way with much conversation, he won little in exchange from Manrique, who, for the most part, preserved respectful silence.

In process of time, however, the bigger man's doubts disappeared, and he found himself jogging abreast of his companion. Manrique's head towered high above the Don's, but, despite repeated efforts, he failed to get a

sight of the stranger's face, for a large wide-brimmed hat with a heavy feather partially shrouded it, and, as surely as the riders came into a gleam of moonlight, where it silvered their road from point to point, so surely would Don Galyn turn away his head and thus render any view of his features impossible. He rode upon the trooper's right, and ceased not to talk until the sequel of the entire incident. This now suddenly happened with appalling swiftness; and Manrique, from a condition of perfect confidence, found himself powerless before the danger of death.

They were riding through a very narrow gorge, and at a point where the path sank sharply and wound in cimmerian darkness under beetling crags. The soldier spoke:

"This place might be worth a Jew's eye in time of war," said he. "Truly ten men well posted here with muskets could slay a thousand."

As though the words had been a signal, they were pointed by a flash of red fire which

leapt suddenly from the crown of a rock not fifty paces ahead of the speaker. But no leaden ball screamed by the travellers, though precipices to right and left rang loudly out, magnifying the solitary discharge into a volley. Manrique's life, however, was none the less assaulted, and that viciously, for as he reined back his horse and turned to fly the ambush, he felt a heavy blow on his right breast, and heard the sharp crack of snapping steel. His own companion it was who had seized the opportunity and struck him hard and deep—a blow which must have certainly ended the soldier's interest in worldly affairs save for that armour beneath his doublet. Instantly he drew and hotly engaged this traitorous friend; but the timid Don, despite his statements to the contrary, possessed evident knowledge of warlike affairs, and when Manrique's heavy weapon quickly beat down his enemy's rapier and fell with a crash upon Don Galyn's shoulder, the tables were turned, for his sword-blade shivered on proof. Already

that dark gorge was alive with hurrying figures, and, before the assaulted man could retreat, a dozen mail-clad foes, rising like spirits from the gloom, were upon him.

"Yield, friend," said the stranger, as pleasantly as ever: "I prithee yield with good grace. It were pity thou shouldst be food for the Hainaut ravens before dawn. Thou hast to do with Spaniards, not Netherlanders, nor Walloons neither; therefore accept the fortunes of war."

Don Galyn made no further effort to hide his face, and Manrique now observed with some horror that it was black—coal black—with piercing eyes shining, beadlike, from it. No hooded devil of the Inquisition heating flesh pincers or screwing a rack could have appeared more hideous. Four others of this band had similar faces, and the discomforted soldier supposed them Ethiopians; but their speech proclaimed otherwise, and marked them not only for Spaniards but seigneurs of some note.

Manrique, alighting, submitted to be bound,

and then asked briefly what might be the will of his captors—a question to which Don Galyn replied:

"Why, 'tis first to learn thy business, friend. I told thee mine with a free tongue, but could win no answering confidence. Who art thou? From whence comest thou, and upon what enterprise art thou embarked?"

"My name is Feria Manrique, soldier of Spain, and privileged by his Majesty to enjoy liberty from arms if I will. My mission is from the Court of Brussels to Mons. And you, Seigneur, would have murdered me. Wherefore?"

"'Tis for us, not thee, to put the question. I struck thee not, but only strove to disarm thee," answered Don Galyn, with cool mendacity. "Now let us seek the bonfire and light a torch or so. The matter needs illumination."

They turned through a cleft among the cliffs, and found themselves within a small theatre of stone and sward, surrounded by

high rocks. Here preparations had already been made, and now fire was set to a huge mass of dry pine and brushwood, which, blazing up and burning freely, soon painted the wild region a fantastic and bloody red, flashed on the armour of the soldiers, and lent a hideous appearance to the black masks of Manrique's conquerors. The prisoner kept his wits and noted, by the firelight, that more than one of the mercenaries about him were men whom he personally knew. His reputation was great, and he trusted it might serve him with some at least of those who had been his own comrades in times past. A rough and ready court was clearly to sit upon Manrique; but while the black masks held conversation aside, their prisoner found opportunity to speak to the soldiers. Happily they seemed of one mind in an important particular. They esteemed their captive not less than a hero, knowing him, some personally, all by repute; and though the fortunes of a rascally intrigue had now placed him in the hands of powerful

men who must prove bitter enemies if thwarted, yet the soldiers declared they would not suffer the favoured of the King to be slain. Upon that most of them appeared agreed; but all, none the less, trusted that Manrique would yield with good grace and do as their masked leaders should desire. Anon, these gentry came forward and seated themselves in a circle about the fire, while Don Galyn opened the matter. His line of argument had changed and he spoke as one bearing authority.

"Mistake us not," he began; "we are no lawless bandits of the night, sprung from these mountain fastnesses to overwhelm thee, but the friends of order and honesty, led by seigneurs of high degree, and sent forth from Brussels by the lady whom thou servest and Count de Velasco."

"To take my life? Was that the Count's direction?"

"Peace, Manrique, and give heed to me. Thou art upon a secret mission for the Countess de Mirando, and I doubt not hadst

fitly performed the same at to-morrow's dawn; but the necessity for such action exists no more. Briefly, the Court hath not left Brussels, nor is it proposed that it shall do so. Therefore the Countess would have her priceless treasure again, and hath despatched us to await thee for that purpose."

"Where is thy authority, Seigneur?"

"Upon the word of Count de Velasco, whose servant am I."

"Were the Count with ye I would not yield the diamond to him. A barren word is poor token for so great a concern."

Two of the black masks laughed, and a third, whose voice was strangely harsh and brutal, made utterance:

"He has the diamond. It is enough. The rest lies with us. See now, Manrique, thou art wholly in our power to do with as we please. Wilt thou then yield without force, on guarantee of personal safety, or draw down upon thyself harsh measures?"

"I know thee not, my lord, though thy voice

is the voice of the noble Seigneur de Noircarmes," answered the soldier.

"Name no names, dog!" thundered back the other angrily. "The diamond, and quickly!"

"Not so, Seigneur. The 'Red Dragon' is for the hand of Count de Mirando."

"Strip him piecemeal then, beat out his armour also, and tear every shred of cloth or leather upon him to tatters. See likewise to the furniture of his horse. Let nothing be overlooked."

It was Don Galyn who gave this command, and with evident reluctance his men obeyed him. The black masks helped also, and examined every particle of Manrique's apparel before the blazing light of their bonfire. First, harness and saddle were chopped to pieces not greater than a hazel nut, every fragment being most closely scrutinised; then the captive soldier's armour was hammered out and proved to conceal nothing. Beneath his breastplate appeared the black ivory box; but Don Galyn's

gratification at sight of it changed quickly to anger when he found the casket empty, and he ground the trifle beneath his heel.

"'Twas the property of Countess de Mirando of Castile, high in favour with the Regent and his Majesty of Spain," said Manrique drily; but the remark cost dear, for Don Galyn, turning furiously, smote him across the mouth. Whereon he spat the blood from his wounded lips, but was wisely silent.

Then, piece by piece, his leathern jerkin, his breeches, long boots, stockings, and under raiment were cut to fragments, and probed and pierced alike by daggers and the keen eyes of the black masks. But not a glimmer of the "Red Dragon" rewarded their search.

Now the soldier stood bound hand and foot and stark naked before them, and at sight of him thus, Noircarmes—for it was that notorious fiend—spoke again:

"Now our task is the lighter, and if the stone be not in his belly we shall find it elsewhere. Crop off his beard and hair: seek in every fold

and wrinkle of the flesh where such a thing might be hid."

Manrique, with calm fortitude and no little dignity, underwent this brutal ordeal; but the soldiers showed scant stomach for their work, and Noircarmes and Don Galyn made personal search, the former thrusting his fingers into the prisoner's nose and roughly probing his ears likewise.

"Even thus," said the sufferer, "did the enemies of my King use me in the past, but I little thought to endure like insult from my own countrymen."

"His mouth!" shouted Don Galyn. "Gag him! Ha, ha! we grow hotter—is it not so, Manrique?"

The naked prisoner made no answer, but allowed his mouth to be opened and a wedge inserted. Then, holding a torch to his face, the eager Don peered between his captive's jaws; but he was rewarded by nothing but the sight of a splendid set of teeth. There appeared no sign of the "Red Dragon," nor

was there the least room within the prisoner's mouth for a stone so great. Nevertheless, the disappointed thief thrust in a portion of his hand and sought roughly beneath Manrique's tongue and at the back of his throat, scratching the tissues with sharp nails, and relieving his growing anger by most cursed brutality. Unluckily for him, however, a furious probe loosened the gag, and Manrique, maddened under this torture, lost his self-control. In a second a sharp snap told what had happened, as the soldier's teeth met, like a steel trap, on Don Galyn's thumb and crushed the bone of it. With a shriek the injured man drew his rapier and would have run the soldier through his naked body, but a black mask held him back, and at the same time two or three of the mercenaries shielded their captive. The fighting men outnumbered their masters by three to one, and were bent on saving the veteran's life if possible. Indeed, when Noircarmes, with motives which he took no pains to hide, bid them bring Manrique

beside the fire, one of the soldiers spoke to the purpose:

"May it please my lord, but this man hath the favour of King Philip. He is a right Royalist and Catholic, and your servants dare do him no hurt."

Such opposition from one of the common herd astounded Noircarmes, as well it might. Perhaps so remarkable a thing had never before come within his experience, and, the wolfish ferocity of the man being already known, it needed no common courage on the part of a paid hireling to beard him thus. For a moment he was silent but took no action, seeing in a flash that the men-at-arms were of one mind. Then, with a volley of blasphemous curses, he made answer:

"By the Son of God, this passeth belief! 'King's man,' sayest thou? Devil's man rather! Who, save only the Father of Evil, doth hold this stone from us? What power hath man to perform a frank miracle? Are such cursed slights to be praised? 'Tis the Author

of all Ill, hid in this man's flesh, who fighteth against us, and, for black magic, fire hath ever been the only remedy. By God! I say, we will have the diamond, though I mince him for it with this hand."

The soldier, having mutinied, knew his life was not worth a rush; but his companions stuck by him so stoutly that, after more words, the black masks went aside and conferred in private for some minutes.

During the interval Manrique spoke with earnestness to his friends, and promised them the powerful support of Count de Mirando when this matter came to his ears.

"I alone can preserve ye now," said he. "If I perish, your lives will surely pay forfeit also, for these miscreant lords need no witnesses of their robbery. The Countess hath high favour with Madame the Duchess Regent, and ye know the Count is more considerable by far than these same rascally seigneurs who have plotted to steal the 'Red Dragon.'"

But his listeners were ill at ease, and much

feared the sequel. Only, with one consent, they stood by Manrique in so far that he should suffer neither the torture nor death.

"They be great lords, and this event hath been planned for many days," explained a soldier.

Then the masked band returned, and Noircarmes spoke. His manner was changed; he affected to be pleasant and even jocose.

"Hear now, thou mad dog, thou most intractable cur; needs must that the Countess shall send thee her own sign manual it would seem? Be it so. Thou art honest at least, and, thanks to these stout swordsmen, better council hath prevailed, and I for one forgive them. They are in the right. I grieve only that we have dealt thus hardly with thee. Now, learn that our cavalcade returneth forthwith to Brussels for warranty from the Countess. She shall send thee the gold circlet from which this cursed stone was drawn forth. Will the ring and her own despatch content thee?"

Manrique reflected for awhile, and then replied that such evidence must prove conclusive.

"Be it so. And, meanwhile, there lies here, between these rocks, a cavern where thou shalt await us."

"Thy men will hold me here till thy return, Seigneur?" asked the prisoner, endeavouring to show no interest in the answer.

Noircarmes laughed.

"Nay, mad dog; we trust them no more than thee. Stout hemp and leather shall better answer our purpose. The grotto is mighty cool and quiet—a place foot of man enters not once in ten years, it would seem. Herein thou shalt be at peace."

Fifty yards away, where the grass ended and the low cliffs jutted upwards, was a mass of briar and shrub, and behind the foliage lay a little cave—profoundly silent, save for the tinkle of dripping water, and very dark. Once within the portal, the cavern grew somewhat larger, and seemed to

probe the very bowels of the hill; but his conquerors conveyed Manrique a short distance only. Here a torch showed wonderful formations of stalagmite and stalactite, and the percolation of water from time immemorial had fashioned solid pillars of carbonate of lime, firmly footed in the floor and reaching to the roof. Against one such Manrique now found himself bound, though with some pretence of mercy. A drink of water was given him and a cloak or two wrapped about his body. Boots, for which he begged, were denied; but a soldier, without asking permission, fetched bundles of fern on which the prisoner could rest his naked feet. His legs were free, but his hands were strapped firmly to his sides, and he was bound to the pillar by the neck in such fashion that any struggle to escape must strangle him.

"By midday we shall once more be with thee," said Noircarmes, as, having seen the rest of his band from the cavern, he stamped out a torch before walking after them.

"Till then possess thy soul in patience, and cry not out, for thou wouldst only waste thy breath. Thou standest, as I know, in a place of ill omen, and the stray peasant or herdsman who heareth thy shout will gabble a prayer and hurry further off."

With that he departed, and the simple soldiers, smelling no treachery, mounted their horses and galloped off behind their masters. Manrique heard the cavalcade thunder away, till all sound was lost in silence. Then he became conscious of the dripping music of the water hard by, and noted also the smouldering torch sending up grey smoke in a dim, quivering premonition of the dawn, which already faintly lighted the mouth of his prison.

CHAPTER IV.

ENCHANTMENT.

BY the orders of the black masks, Manrique's horse had been left tethered hard by the cave, a circumstance which appeared reasonable enough to the mercenaries whose united action had saved their compatriot's life. They, indeed, saw no significance in recent events save that upon the face of them, and when, therefore, a sudden incident arrested the cavalcade on its return journey none but the conspirators themselves realised its purport. As the men and their leaders trotted steadily back through the gorge towards Brussels, and after they had gone some two miles or more, one among the black masks suddenly pulled up and dismounted. Von der Huyls, for such was the young noble's name, bid a soldier hold his horse by the head, and then, in the dim dawn, it seemed

that he picked from out one of its hinder shoes a stone which had wedged there. This done, he remounted, but had not travelled above fifty yards when he stopped again declaring his steed dead lame. Meantime, Don Galyn, suffering dire torment from his crushed thumb, had sped forward, and only Noircarmes and three troopers remained with Von der Huyls. The latter it was who suddenly, as an inspiration, suggested returning to the ambush in the cliffs and making use of the grey mare still tethered there.

"'Twill bear me well back to Brussels," said he, "and when our party sets forth again to-morrow it can bring along a fresh steed for Manrique."

Noircarmes hesitated some few moments, but finally decided that this was the only practicable course. He was far better mounted than the troopers, and therefore decided to accompany Von der Huyls, while at the same time he bid the men hurry after the main body which, with Don Galyn and the other masks,

was now nearly a mile ahead of them. The injured horse, despite its lameness, was able to travel faster than a man, so its rider did not dismount, but progressed slowly after Noircarmes, while the soldiers, completely deceived by the result of this brief debate, set spurs to their horses and thundered noisily after their companions.

Hardly were they out of sight, however, before the two black masks pricked their steeds and galloped speedily back upon the way they had come, while all trace of lameness in the mount of Von der Huyls vanished.

This, then, was the result of the last deliberation. Noircarmes had sketched the crude plot, and matters fell out exactly as he foretold. The return journey was to be made by himself and one other, ostensibly to exchange a lame horse for the tethered mare, in reality on a widely different errand. Present conversation threw sinister light upon their intentions.

"The baser sort," said Noircarmes, "have no soul that can rise superior to fleshly torment. 'Tis only your heretic hath power to face the ingenuity of the godly Inquisition and still hold his heart locked. Even they oftentimes succumb, and those that do not so are of a surety sustained by the Father of Evil. Their strength is not their own."

"But this Manrique, I take it, hath a devil likewise. Else whence his power? 'Twas your own word. If the 'Red Dragon' be not spirited away by witchcraft, where shall it be?"

"Truly a red-hot dagger point may find thine answer easier than I. Our most holy Inquisition is a mighty hunter out of gold, silver, and precious stones. I have seen a man suffer his tongue to be torn away and not long afterwards scream heartily for wherewithal to write. For my part, I have learned not a little under Titelmann himself; and it shall go ill if my wits cannot better his instructions within this hour."

Dawn had already broken and a blackcock

was calling in the pines when the horsemen galloped back to the cleft in the rocks, and, making fast their horses, strode to where the bonfire, now reduced to a pile of white ashes and black, sent upwards a slender column of blue smoke. But a kick from Von der Huyls showed glowing embers beneath the charcoal, and revealed a fire amply hot enough for the desired purpose. A great silence had settled within the rocky theatre. In the grey dawn the low cliffs, the pine trees, the tumbled masses of stone upon the sward, the yawning mouth of the cave, dimly indicated behind its curtain of briar and bush, all suggested unutterable desolation. A spirit of loneliness brooded over the spot: no ear but a god's would note man's loudest yell of agony echoing there under the dayspring.

To the cave Noircarmes and his companion turned their footsteps, designing to bring forth the prisoner, stake him to the ground beside the fire, and then try what devilish cruelty could do towards dragging his secret from him.

Both yet wanted some fifty paces of the cavern, when, from the black depths of it, came a strange low rumbling as of distant thunder. The sound increased and ended as suddenly as it had begun with a vibrating crash that seemed to suggest the great pillars of the cave had fallen and overwhelmed the interior. A pair of gledes, startled from their roosting-place, shot from the darkness and soared swiftly to the crags above. Dead silence followed, intensifying this sudden fury of sound and hidden motion. For a moment the knights were staggered. Such manifestations from a grotto, tenanted only by one helpless prisoner, offered a problem not easily solved.

"What make you of that?" asked Von der Huyls uneasily. "They say the Devil helps his own."

"This place hath an evil repute, so 'tis said," answered Noircarmes; "but neither man nor fiend yet turned me from a purpose. Draw your sword and follow me closely."

They strode together into the darkness and chill air of the cavern. All was profoundly silent save for the eternal drip of the water whose subterranean stream here found vent. Von der Huyls had brought a torch, and now, blowing the spark to flames, held it over his head, and peered toward the spot where Manrique was fastened. For a moment it seemed as though the soldier had disappeared, but further scrutiny showed a prostrate white form lying at the base of the pillar to which he had been bound. Motionless as a corpse the figure lay upon the fern plucked for Manrique's naked feet.

"He hath been stricken down," whispered Von der Huyls. "Of a truth that devil's din was created by things hidden from flesh and blood."

"Hold thy fool's tongue and bear the flame more steadily," answered his companion, as pushing forward, he stood beside the prone figure.

But even Noircarmes felt his heart leap and

the hot blood flog at his temples before a spectacle now stretched under the torchlight upon the ground. Instead of Manrique, there lay a contorted, misshapen monster with the limbs of a man, horribly twisted and tapering to points like tree roots. A cloak covered its middle; the shapeless head, trunk and limbs were all wrought as from the stony icicles of the cavern, and the unholy thing glimmered and seemed to move as the torchlight flashed red upon it.

"Jesus, help me!" cried Von der Huyls, finding his tongue at last. "This is enchantment worse than ever I heard tell of until now. Fly, man, fly, ere your veins turn to stone and your body to these cursed crystals! Dear God! I feel the icy hand of this horror even now biting under my mail!"

He turned, dropped his torch, and staggered to the entrance of the cave; while Noircarmes, scarcely less terrified, shouted to Christ to save him, and crossed himself fervently as he rushed back into the air.

Neither rascal doubted for an instant but that he had seen with his own eyes one of those catastrophes handled so freely in the romances of the period. Devilish enchantment had most certainly turned Manrique to a substance scarcely less adamantine than the "Red Dragon" itself; and to the terrified eyes of the twain, as they made for their horses, it seemed that the great Flanders mare, sleeping motionless under a pine, had been likewise turned into stone.

And not until the last sound of galloping hoofs had ceased to echo did any further matter fall out within the cavern. Then a low laugh crept, like a thawed echo, from the upper darkness of the roof, a pebble or two clattered noisily downwards, and the sound was followed by a louder, as of some heavy body climbing not easily in the darkness. Immediately afterwards a white figure appeared and walked across to where lay the petrified thing which burlesqued humanity so hideously. It plucked the cloak from the

stalactites thus arranged in semblance of a man, and throwing the same over its own shoulders, proceeded to the entrance of the cavern.

It was Manrique, and he presented an appearance scarcely less horrible than that which he had contrived to personate him. He was naked, save for a cloak about his loins and another over his shoulders; dry blood, from his torn nostrils and tattered beard, had clotted on his face; his hair was shorn off, and his hasty climb in the cavern had been responsible for many a fresh abrasion and wound.

Briefly, the man's friends were to be thanked for furnishing the power to escape, as matters had fallen out. The soldier who had cast a pile of fern beneath his feet, whispered at the same moment that a knife lay hidden under it; and this Manrique quickly found with his foot. He could not bend to reach it; moreover, his hands as well as his neck were firmly tied; but his feet had been left free, and, after

a few attempts, the man succeeded in raising the knife between his toes and so getting it within reach of his hand. The rest was easy and he soon stood free. Fearing no further assault for the space at least of many hours, he had proceeded leisurely with the construction of a stone dummy before pushing forward to Mons. His purpose was twofold, and he looked forward at the future. There could be no return for him to Brussels. He knew what revenge meant, and was aware that Don Galyn would leave no stone unturned to compass his destruction. Therefore he fashioned the effigy, knowing this grotto was accounted a place of magic, and believing that, at sight of the stalagmites, men would most surely ascribe his taking off to enchantment, and trouble no more concerning him. Meantime, Manrique designed to place his case before the Count de Mirando, receive the reward of his services, mention those mercenaries who had befriended him at their own peril in the moment of his need, and then depart straightway to Spain.

He had been sharply surprised by the return of Noircarmes and Von der Huyls, and suddenly observing their approach, himself unseen, made a desperate effort to climb into security among the boulders on the precipitous sides of the cavern. This he had achieved, but only at the expense of new wounds and the displacement of a huge rock, which, thundering down and awakening all the echoes as his foes approached, had served, though Manrique trembled for his safety at the time, to add not a little to the effect of his ruse.

And now, as though the bruised and battered warrior had not suffered enough from Fortune's buffets, a further injury most curiously befell him. Walking—a strange, rueful figure enough—towards his horse, the man trod along gingerly over a carpet of pine-needles beneath the trees, and yet, despite his caution, at the third or fourth stride he felt under his left foot the sharp stab of steel. Bending to see the cause of this further

reverse, the malediction on his lips died unuttered, and he stood struck dumb with extreme astonishment. There, lying by the blood that dripped freely from a deep cut in his heel, was the handle of a strange weapon which Manrique had seen for the first time on the previous day and noted observantly. A main-gauche dagger lay before him, with one inch only of the blade remaining. It had a shell guard, ivory grip, and curved quillons finely wrought. This then was the weapon which Don Galyn had splintered against his breastplate, and with this same stiletto Manrique knew full well that Count de Velasco had pricked the "Red Dragon" from its setting of gold. It seemed difficult to suppose that two such unusual weapons had chanced to be at one time in Brussels, and yet to question the identity of Don Galyn appeared equally absurd. At any rate, return to the city he had left grew more and more out of the question. He pictured the house wherein he dwelt at

Brussels burned to the ground; he imagined a hundred plots to destroy him set on foot by those well able to carry them through, and he saw himself tossed to the hangman after secret hours spent as the guest of the Inquisition. Some seigneur certainly had a broken thumb to avenge; the individual or his real name mattered little to Manrique.

He limped along, reached the horse mercifully spared to him, and, ten minutes later, passed out of the desolate gorge, anon finding himself on lower ground upon the way towards Mons. His eye roamed over the land for a roof-tree or the smoke of fire; but it was not until he had ridden slowly forward about an hour that he noted water sheening red in sundawn, and the substantial walls of a homestead rising beside it. Then he hastened on with good-will. Day had broken now, and the mists and vapours were touched with red-gold as they rose to kiss the morning, and so vanish until returning night should give them their ghostly shapes again.

CHAPTER V

THE SECRET.

FARMER VAN TRIER, though he was a good Catholic, loved not Spain, and the little man took it ill when to his portal there came at sunrise the apparition of a gaunt, black-eyed, grizzled and tatter-bearded Spaniard, seated, nearly stark naked, on a tall grey mare. The farmer resented a spectacle so uncouth, for there was nothing to account for it. He rarely drank to excess, and no over night potation hinted at any just cause for seeing the thing which was not. So van Trier crossed himself prayerfully, and then, finding that action powerless to dispel this devilish image, he tried rubbing his eyes. But the unclad man proved no monstrous exhalation of the morning. He was alive, and his mare was alive, and both, as the

horseman presently explained, went in need of succour.

"Good-morrow, worthy sir; how far is it to Mons?" began Manrique.

"Two leagues, and the road lies before you," answered van Trier.

"So far well, but I am in no plight to make the entry of a notable town. Regard me, good farmer. I have been sore set upon, and now come from seeing death face to face. I am upon a perilous enterprise for the Countess de Mirando, a lady of the Court, and I have fallen into the hands of bloody masked bandits among the nightly fastnesses of the hills."

"Truly you need a pair of breeches and some such like matters," admitted the farmer.

"Ay, and more than that. My left foot is in poor case, and to go thus mother-naked through half the night hath chilled my blood not a little. Bestow hospitality, I beg, on one who hath power to requite handsomely. Accompany me anon to Mons, and five golden ducats shall be thy reward."

The farmer hesitated, knowing a Spaniard's word to be more brittle than spring ice; but Manrique's foot spoke truth: it was greatly swollen, and there could be no mistake as to the severity of the gash upon his heel. Finally, when the promise of gold ducats had been repeated, van Trier consented to do what was desired of him. He assisted the wounded soldier to dismount, directed that his steed should be led to the stall, and hastened to offer man and horse all possible entertainment. Both were soon in easy circumstances once again and Manrique, after copious ablutions and a heavy breakfast, with much strong ale to wash it down, scarce knew himself. The farmer's wife tended his foot and swaddled it handsomely in a roll of soft stuff, while a stout doublet and hose of frieze cloth brought warmth to his body. Before midday a start was made for Mons, the good Samaritan accompanying his guest. A mighty comical contrast the two presented: the huge and battered soldier astride his great steed, and

van Trier, of small and plump habit, progressing beside him astride a black ass.

The first thing they heard on reaching the city was that Count de Mirando and his retinue had arrived on the previous day, and that the Count designed to proceed to Brussels that same evening. The Jacks-in-office assured Manrique that he could hardly hope to obtain an audience, for their master had received despatches from Brussels only half an hour before his arrival, and they doubted not that his news, which he withheld from them, must be but stale. However, the soldier's name acted like a charm. Count de Mirando commanded that he should instantly be brought before him, dismissed his secretary, and then greeted Manrique with some approach to warmth. He was a stern, extremely handsome man, with great store of successful achievement behind him, and equal promise of high prosperity hid in the future. He had his share of the hidalgo haughtiness proper to Castile, but he could unbend upon

occasion, and a warrior ever held the key of his heart.

"Welcome, Manrique. Thou art in season, as much for thine own sake as my anxieties. But thy presence, not unwounded, and with easy conscience, kills my fears. The 'Red Dragon'——?"

"Is safe and sound, my master."

The Count nodded, then turned to his table and picked up a letter.

"This from my Lady," he said briefly. "It reached my hand by special messenger from Brussels not an hour before your arrival. Thus she writes:—

"'It hath pleased God to take from us the "Red Dragon." Velasco insisted that the stone should be despatched herefrom to Mons, the times being unquiet. He held your authority, and against my inclinations I consented to the mandate. He desired that one of his own soldiers should convey the diamond to you, but mistrusting the Count (for reasons I shall break to you anon) I held stoutly for

my own messenger, and sent to Manrique, a Castilian and famed by reason of the despatch he marvellously bore in times past from the Cardinal to the King. Him I saw, and to him I trusted the jewel, the time then being before noon this day. Not long after his departure, Orange and the great seigneurs prevailed with the Duchess, and 'twas decided that the Court should remain in Brussels. Thereupon Velasco sent urgent messengers to Manrique, bidding him bring back the diamond to the Palace, but he had already vanished, and with him the "Red Dragon." Further than this is as yet unknown.'"

The Count ceased reading, and looked at Manrique.

"Now," said he, "thy story?"

"No counter-summons reached me, my lord. I went about my business and left the Caudenberg gate at the time Count de Velasco directed. Further, ere I recite my adventure, I beg you to note a thing I have here beneath my doublet."

So saying, Manrique produced the broken dagger which had wounded his foot. The other knew it, and started with astonishment.

"By our Lord! 'tis Velasco's poignard!"

"I much fear so, Count. I saw it in his hand before I felt it in another's."

Then the soldier told his story, omitting no detail, and concluding with these words:

"Now, with my lord's leave, I lie here until my foot be restored whole. Then my road points to Spain, for death is all Brussels can offer; and I long, with a great longing, to end my days on a Castilian bed, and not strung to a Netherlandish gallows."

"There hath been a hellish plot to steal the diamond," declared Mirando thoughtfully. "This ingrate hath worked upon my wife to suffer the stone out of her own possession, and hath conspired against myself—the man whose voice placed him in his present power. Fool that I was, I have trusted him most completely; and whether he accompanied the

black masks or no, this base design had birth with him."

"True, noble Count; and but for certain of the soldiery, who knew my name and fame, my life had surely passed from my body in such torment as the great Seigneur de Noircarmes had devised. The men were stout for me, and I pray you think on them when you shall arrive in Brussels, for else their courage is like to meet with ugly reward."

"They shall enter my service if they live to-morrow, friend. And now, Manrique, this same wondrous splinter of twinkling stone—is it within the bounds of belief that, stripped naked, and subjected to the scrutiny of a Noircarmes, thou couldst bring it safely off?"

"Even so, Count, though of a truth I thought little about the 'Red Dragon' when I stood so nigh to death. But my slaughter had brought these same rude lords no nearer thy diamond."

"My lady sent your sealed packet with her

own, and I, judging your oath broken, straightway read what you had set down. And yet only a further mystery awaited me. Where learned you to write?"

"In Venice, Count. Didst thou not gather my secret from the letter?"

"Assuredly no."

"And yet, hadst thou complied with the direction, and sought my corpse and gazed on the face thereof, I, though dead and dumb, should have told thee of the gem with sufficient directness."

He turned from the Count as he spoke, walked behind a leathern screen which stood hard by, and, remaining invisible scarce half a minute, returned. On his hand, throwing a thousand twinkling shafts of brightness about it, lay the "Red Dragon."

Count de Mirando took the gem, and, having gazed upon it with satisfaction, regarded Manrique curiously.

"Men have been racked and burned for less magic than this," he said.

"Truly there was no magic, Seigneur. I am a plain man."

"And now to the ducats named in my lady's letter. 'Tis a large sum."

"Ay, my lord, but thou wilt not say unearned. I have lost my armour, which I loved only less well than life; I have lost my sword, that I would not have changed for twenty 'Red Dragons'; I have lost——"

"Fear not for thy ducats, Manrique—they are here, and only wait the counting. But I am curious as a woman in this matter, and will give thee half as many pieces again to know thy secret. Thou art about returning to Spain, and, upon my oath, the mystery shall not pass my lips to a living soul."

The soldier reflected.

"Wilt thou swear by the Pains of Mary, Count, never to reveal this matter—nay, not even to the wife of thy bosom?"

"Most solemnly I swear, Manrique."

"Thou art perhaps the only man on God's earth, Count, to whom I would tell my secret,

but I trust thee, for I have fought beside thee and seen thee fight."

He turned away a moment, then turned again.

"Look upon me now, good Seigneur."

The Count stared, and an involuntary expression of sudden horror burst from his lips. In place of the two piercing orbs that shone beneath the Spaniard's brows, there now gleamed but one. A red, gaping socket had taken the place of the other, and in his hand Manrique held up an eye of glass.

"A Mexican arrow robbed me," he said, "and this miracle of glass was fashioned for me by a cunning artificer in Venice. My eyes are coal black, as thou seest, and his feat was therefore the easier. Behind this tiny circle of glass, and fitted within the hollow of it, I bore the Cardinal's despatch writ small; and herein likewise thy gem has safely travelled. Hadst thou found me dead and gazed upon my face, thou wilt now see that my secret had been one no more."

In a moment the eye was back in its socket, while Count de Mirando, with a startled oath, returned to his desk, and from sundry fat bags poured forth Manrique's reward.

* * * *

Before morning the Count and his retinue arrived in Brussels, and his fair partner's heart was soon relieved of a mighty sorrow. For him, too, she had some intelligence of a tartling nature.

"You are to know," said she, "that the Count de Velasco hath perished most miserably of a locked jaw. He suffered spasms of unutterable torment, nor could the chirurgeons avail him anything. 'Tis rumoured that some mad and murderous hound did fly upon him yesternight as he walked in darkness."

"Truly, he who so walketh must rest content to abide the issue," her husband made answer.

"I prithee exercise all caution with thy own hounds, Count, for dogs are deemed a peril in this fiery weather."

"'Tis passing hot in truth, fair heart," he replied; "but, touching this same black Velasco, it may justly be held an open question whether or no he hath of late bettered his climate."

And then he told the lady of matters with which we are already familiar.

END OF "THE TRANSIT OF THE RED DRAGON."

The Mystery of the Toadstone.

CHAPTER I.

A STRANGE LEGACY.

WHEN my friend, Jack Hawthorn, sent down to say he could see nobody, I laughed in his man's face, told him to get out of the way, and marched into Jack's chambers.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he asked, not looking off the manuscript spread before him. Come in and give us a helping hand. Not that I need it, all the same."

Jack was a virtuoso, or connoisseur of the weird. Crime had no particular fas-

cination for him, unless it cropped up, as it often did, in the heart of a mystery that began quite innocently; but his triumphs were, for the most part, those of peace. In the solution of cryptical inscriptions, palimpsests, and puzzles, the man was unexampled. Nothing but inspiration could explain some of his successes. Where avowed experts had broken down, Jack Hawthorn more than once came to the rescue, with results altogether astounding.

He was cursed with five hundred a year, and a spirit that could not brook hard work. He dawdled through life his own way, failed at school, failed at college, failed in his one futile experiment in the city. Now he lived in chambers, kept a valet, who did all the work of his three modest rooms, and wandered from his club back to his chambers, from his chambers to his club again.

His was a curious personality—a strange blend of singular acuteness and simplicity. But upon the man I need not dwell here, as

the following experience is likely to display his character in word and action.

Outwardly, Jack had the student's air and thin cheek. He let his red hair grow long, as much from laziness as affectation; his light grey eyes were microscopes for keenness; his frame was thin, but muscular and well-knit.

As I entered he sat bent over his table, clad in a rusty old Norfolk jacket, an under-vest, and a pair of grey flannel trousers. The weather was hot, and an open bottle of claret with a syphon of soda-water stood on the table before him, in a litter of papers, books, pens and ink.

"What 's the latest problem?" I asked.

"I 've just had this old bundle of odds and ends sent to me by parcel post from some unknown admirer," he answered, pointing to a portfolio which lay open on the floor. "It contains a collection of old manuscripts and fragments—mostly rubbish; but some are rather interesting. The letter with the

parcel tells me that an old fellow down in Wales left me his hoard of cherished scraps by will, suspecting they might give me pleasure. He is, or was, one Sir John Gobie, and that 's all I know about him at present. There are one or two good autographs here, which must enrich your collection, old man; and a bit of black letter that will go into mine. It 's the strangest medley. I 'm amusing myself with this stupid trifle just now."

He handed to me a rough sheet of ancient, hand-made paper. It was ruled in blue ink for money columns, and had evidently been torn from its companion pages in some old ledger. The fragment appeared much the worse for wear, being worn and torn and stained with age. On one corner a glass of liquor had stood, for the stuff evidently ran over at the time, leaving a round, brown impression. In the centre of the paper, written with extremely neat caligraphy, appeared this singular puzzle:—

".C*(zd)rB n)tt!rT .dn! ym sw)nk (hw
t(w f) n*m !ht)t t(s!vl)s [41 dn* 31 s!n(L
I !n!cS II tc✱] (LY✱ !r*!ps!k*hS
.ss!—g)t sr!ht) r)f !ldd(r * !v*!l
dn* hs(n*v w)n r!nw) st( )t !lzz—p
d!sr—c * n!!b s*h hc(hw !f(l * t!L
.1842 .s)d*br*B t✱"

"It seems simple enough, Jack," I remarked, just to see what he would say.

"As a matter of fact, I think so, too," he answered, with a short laugh. "But since when have you acquired the power of reading a cryptogram at a glance? I did not know it was in your line."

"Bless your life, if existence depended upon it, I could not solve that thing," I answered frankly; and Hawthorn, contented to hear me say so, resumed his study.

"It's a puzzle within a puzzle," he said presently. "Hand me my Shakespeare, old chap, and take some claret-and-soda."

I obeyed, and presently, having studied a

scene in *As You Like It*, Hawthorn dropped his papers and turned to me.

"Gad! there's quite a pretty mystery hidden here, West."

"Not beyond your powers, Jack?"

"I don't know. I've solved the riddle itself; but that only helps me a little."

"Solved the riddle!"

"A child could."

Then for my edification he took me through the preliminary stages of the enigma to the point which he himself had reached.

"It's an old, crude form of cryptogram, and I solved it in an old, crude way," he began. "If you look at this thing with a little care you'll see odd points about it in a moment. It is a mixture of letters and symbols blended together. The symbols are the first that would be likely to occur to a simple mind; notes of exclamation, asterisks, dashes, and the like; the letters are chiefly remarkable from the fact that there are no vowels among them, ex-

cepting only the capital letter *Y* in the third line and the small *y* in the first. Moreover, each word of the puzzle is separated by a slight space from the next, a fact that simplifies the solution immensely. I marvel somebody did not solve it years and years ago."

I said nothing, and he continued:

"Well, you note the absence of vowels and the presence of symbols. That points clearly to a childish fact: the author took out his vowels and substituted symbols for them—a very old form of private codes, but unequal to puzzling anybody of average intelligence This has been done here. I will not trouble you with my experiments, but they were few, and based upon the known proportion of vowels each to the other. Their order is as follows: *e*, *a*, *o*, *i* and *u*. By an accident this proportion actually obtains in the few lines before us. Take the symbols each in turn, and you will find there are twenty-two notes of exclamation; therefore ! takes the place of 'e.' There

are seventeen asterisks; therefore * takes the place of 'a.' There are fourteen right-handed brackets and ten left-handed ones; therefore) takes the place of 'o' and (takes the place of 'i.' The dash occurs only thrice; therefore — takes the place of 'u.' I hardly expected that the general known proportions of vowels would fall quite accurately in such a brief passage; but it did so, and here is the result."

He handed me the first step towards light in the cryptogram. Now its appearance was transformed as follows:—

".caizdorB notterT .dne ym swonk ohw
tiw fo nam eht ot ti sevlos [41 dna 31 seniL
I enecS II tcA] ILYA eraepsekahS
.sseug ot srehto rof elddir a evael
dna hsinav won renwo sti ot elzzup
desruc a neeb sah hcihw efil a teL
.1842 .sodabraB tA"

"Now you see the language is English," said Hawthorn calmly. "I must note that

where the *large* asterisks occurred, two in the third line and one in the last, I have put a capital A."

"As to English," I answered, "you 'll forgive me, but if that 's English then I 'm a foreigner. English! Why, man, there 's not an English word in the thing, excepting 'won' in the fifth line, and a soda-and-brandy, or something like it, in the last."

"It all depends on how you look at it," he answered. "A man who does my work gets into the habit of distrusting appearances. There are many different ways of reading as well as writing. To read from left to right is a mere matter of convention. Why not read in perpendicular lines instead of horizontal ones? Or why not read from right to left? In this case you will find matters much simplified by reading from right to left."

Then he handed me the next stage of the problem, with each line written from the right hand to the left:—

" who knows my end. Tretton Brodziac.
Lines 31 and 41] solves it to the man of wit
Shakespeare A.Y.L.I. [Act II Scene I
leave a riddle for others to guess.
puzzle to its owner now vanish and
Let a life which has been a cursed
At Barbados, 1842."

" Where figures occur, the genius who made this riddle has not troubled to reverse them," explained Hawthorn, " therefore we have lines 31 and 41, which, as you will read, make a sort of sense, and the year 1842."

" The last state of the conundrum is slightly better than the first, and that 's all I can say for it, Jack," I answered.

" How dull you are. This is not the ' last state,' as you call it. For the instruction of duffers like you I 've worked it to the bitter end, though a moment's thought should make the thing clear as it stands. Again, you are a mere slave of convention. You always begin at the top and read to the bottom. But why not begin at the bottom and read to the

top? Then you will find this matter sufficiently clear. There's a sort of rough cleverness about the puzzle, I admit. It's all written backwards to begin with, and upside down into the bargain. Now start at the bottom and read upward line by line. Then I'll copy out the result."

I read the stuff out from the bottom, as he directed, and he took it down at my dictation. Upon which the puzzle assumed this form:—

"At Barbados, 1842.
Let a life which has been a cursed
puzzle to its owner now vanish and
leave a riddle for others to guess.
Shakespeare A.Y.L.I. [Act II., Scene I. Lines 31 and 41] solves it to the man of wit who knows my end. Tretton Brodziac."

"So much for that," I said. "Let us have something more to drink on the strength of it. I suppose you've done what you regard as the mere clerical work; now I will thank you to explain the real difficulties, if you can."

CHAPTER II.

SOME STEPS TOWARDS SOLUTION.

HAWTHORN lighted a cigar, pushed the papers on which he had been at work away from him, and wheeled round his chair. Before doing so he picked up his Shakespeare, open at the second act of *As You Like It.*

"It is not difficult to see what the letters A.Y.L.I. stand for," he began; "but the two lines specially quoted convey no information to me at present. Here they are, however." And he turned again to his desk to jot down the following quotations from the open page before him:—

"Act II., Scene I., Line 31:

'Under an oak, whose antique root peeps out—'

"Act II., Scene I., Line 41:

'Much marked of the melancholy Jaques.'"

"There you are," said Hawthorn; "we are to understand an ancient oak with gnarled roots; and it is an object of interest and attraction to a certain Jaques, or James, perhaps. Now comes the rub. We are told that these lines from the Bard should solve this riddle, '*to the man of wit who knows my end.*' Granted, for argument, that we are men of wit; yet we don't know Tretton Brodziac's end or his beginning, or in fact anything whatever about him; so these lines convey no particular meaning to us."

"And oaks don't grow in Barbados, surely?"

"I believe not, but that is a detail. Because the puzzle was made in the West Indies, it does not follow that the mystery it hides must lie there."

"Shall you bother any more over the thing?"

"Certainly. This is the sort of concern I always bother over. It may be worth while. I can write to the executors of Sir John Gobie. They possibly know something. Failing them, I shall drop a line to a friend of mine in

Barbados. If Brodziac was a celebrity, or did anything out of the common, as this cryptogram rather implies, then we may get some facts concerning him. He writes before his death, of course, though one might judge this a sort of spirit communication, for he speaks of his end as accomplished. The idea of it is already clear in his mind."

"Does the paper on which the puzzle is written tell you anything?"

"Only the fact that a pot of liquor had been set down violently upon it at some time or other, that it is of coarse ancient manufacture, and that it was roughly torn from some sort of account book or ledger. But there is more to know. Call again next time you are passing—that is, if the concern interests you sufficiently."

"I am interested," I answered; and with that, having discussed the matter about which I had called, I took my leave.

There were undoubted elements of fascination in the puzzle. The writer promised

nothing, but yet I felt a suspicion that he had hidden something worth knowing. Perhaps the roots of the antique oak held his secret; perhaps the "Melancholy Jaques" would be able to explain it. At any rate, I seriously assert here, at the outset of this strange adventure, that a sort of instinct or presentiment told me considerable issues were involved, and that even Hawthorn's own future prosperity hung in some sort on the bequest of this singular document.

The busy course of events banished my friend from my mind for nearly a month. During that time he came occasionally into my thoughts, but no opportunity offered for a meeting. At last, however, on an evening in late August I went from my office in the city straight to his chambers. He was seated, as usual, before his desk, and as I entered he resumed the thread of our former conversation as though a minute instead of a month had broken it.

"Glad you are here, old man. Sir John

Gobie's executors could give me no light whatever, excepting that the Knight was a high official in Barbados about fifty years ago; but Thomas Tranby, of Bridgetown—the friend I mentioned to you—luckily possessed a little information. Here it is. He writes as follows."

Hawthorn then read to me a letter from the West Indies:—

"'Tretton Brodziac was a notorious rascal who came from the Argentine Republic originally. One or two old niggers remember him perfectly, I believe, and his name is now an excuse for every far-fetched story of villainy in Barbados. Most of these yarns are untrue, no doubt, but one at least appears to be authentic. He stole the celebrated "Toadstone," a diamond which belonged to one Mrs. Forrester, of Barbados, in 1842. That much nobody doubts, and it is also certain that the deed cost Brodziac his life soon afterwards. He was found dead when the authorities tracked him down and prepared to take him

after his robbery. But whether he killed himself, or was murdered by an accomplice, no man ever discovered. The matter was a mystery at the time, and fifty years have not helped to solve it. I am told there is an old nigger somewhere in "Bim" who was present when they discovered Brodziac's dead body. If I can find him I might get you a little more information, but I will not vouch for its accuracy. All black men are liars.'"

"That's what he's got to say," remarked my friend, breaking off and throwing down the letter. "The old nigger alluded to is probably the 'Jaques' of the puzzle."

"Let me hear the original riddle again, Hawthorn, in the light of these added facts."

"You shall," he answered; "but there is another point to be noted first. You see, a certain diamond known as the 'Toadstone' is mentioned here; and my friend asserts that it is a remarkable stone. Upon that point I have consulted an expert, a gentleman who knows the history of every really famous gem

the world has ever boasted. I went to see the great Mr. Fielder himself, and he extended his usual courtesy to me, and placed his stores of knowledge at my service. He is a walking encyclopædia on this subject."

"Did he know the diamond?"

"He knew it by repute. The 'Toadstone' diamond belonged originally to one of the Western India Rajahs. It undoubtedly passed through the hands of Warren Hastings. Mr. Fielder traced the gem's history, and very varied and interesting it was. The stone seems to have acquired its name from some legend—of course not an Indian one. Erasmus mentions toadstones, and another old writer, Bartholome by name, is quite learned in them. One, Batman, has annotations on Bartholome, and here are a few remarks which I have copied from Batman."

Jack broke off, and read the following quaint extract:—

"Some toads that breed in Italy and about Naples have in their heads a stone called a

Crapo, of bignes like to big pease, but flat, of colour gray, with a browne spot in the midst, said to be of virtue."

"Now," commented Hawthorn, "this superstition, though very ancient, is still extant among the ignorant. Fielder knew that the 'Toadstone' diamond was in Italy in 1825, and I suspect that about that date it acquired the name from some possessor. Mr. Fielder," he continued, "explained that the stone was finally lost in the West Indies at Barbados; and he gave me one or two particulars. Brodziac, it seems, was a noted rascal, and a very clever one. He scraped acquaintance with the widow of a certain Colonel Forrester, the owner of the diamond at that time, and finally robbed her of it, substituting a crystal of similar size and shape. By some accident the theft was discovered almost immediately, and Brodziac's arrest instantly attempted at a little villa residence which he inhabited somewhere near the southern shore of Barbados. But upon the place being forced open, Tretton

Brodziac himself was discovered dead. The manner of his end is unknown. Whether he had killed himself or been murdered was not made clear. One thing, however, is certain—the 'Toadstone' diamond was never seen again. Its history has thus a sudden period put to it. Mr. Fielder confidently believed that the stone would reappear some day, like many other famous gems; but for my part, I think he must be sanguine to say so."

Hawthorn concluded, and I put a few questions.

"Do you imagine that this cryptogram refers to the diamond?"

"I am sure of it."

"Could Fielder give you any idea of the value of the diamond?"

"He asserted that it must be worth about fifteen thousand pounds or more, and he added that there were at least three men in England who would gladly give fifteen thousand for it."

"Is this diamond to be regarded as treasure-

trove? Might the finder claim it by right of discovery?"

"A business-like question! I asked the same myself. As far as Fielder knew, the late Colonel Forrester's family has become extinct."

"And the next thing, old man?"

"Well, I am not hopeful, but I rather want a holiday."

"You 're going to Barbados, then?"

"As a matter of fact, I start next Wednesday in the Royal Mail steamer *Don*. Why not come with me?"

"I 've arranged to take my holidays from next Monday—a month. But I was rather thinking of going to Norway."

"Come to the West Indies, my dear chap, a month should cover all. If we strike the gem your jaunt will be worth seven thousand five hundred pounds to you."

And so it came about that we actually started.

"Mind you, this is merely a holiday; the

'Toadstone' is only our excuse for a trip, not our main object in sailing. We are here for sea air and rest and pleasure," declared Hawthorn. Ten times a day did he impress this fact upon me; but he need not have done so, for I was not nearly as sanguine as he imagined.

CHAPTER III.

THE LADY PASSENGER.

ON the voyage to Barbados, Hawthorn said little about our enterprise, excepting to scoff at it. Now and then, however, he gave serious thought to the matter, and on one of these occasions he alluded to the original cryptogram.

"Have you studied it in the light of all we now know?" he asked; and I admitted that I had not.

"Well," he continued, "we find, for instance, that ——"

He broke off suddenly, and bowed to a lady who passed us as we sat on the quarter-deck. Awnings were up, and though only three days out from England, somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Azores, the weather began to grow tremendously hot. Hawthorn's acquaintance, a stranger to me, was a pretty

woman with a thoughtful face and fine grey eyes. She looked young, and to her sweet expression was added a sadness and resignation of manner which suggested that the lines of her life were not cast in very pleasant places. Thus I criticised her, and was surprised to find my friend throw himself with some interest into the subject, and for the present dismiss the "Toadstone" and all its mysterious accompaniments. Hawthorn's acuteness did not extend to human documents, for I never saw a worse judge of character.

"I think you described her very accurately," he said, in answer to my brief comment on the young lady. "She has seen a good deal of sorrow, or I am mistaken. It happens that, as you know, she sits on my left at meals, and so I have scraped acquaintance. She is a very beautiful girl; she is extremely clever, and her nature appears most sympathetic. I have watched her, and seen her do more than one kindly act for her sick sisters on board. She 's a fine sailor herself, by the way."

"Is she alone?"

"Quite, I fancy. I noticed the chair she was sitting in on deck is labelled 'Miss Wardour.' Here she comes again; let me introduce you."

The girl approached, and Jack introduced me, mentioning her name at the same moment. Thereupon she laughed, and corrected him.

"Perhaps you are misled by a name on one of the deck-chairs or in the list of passengers, Mr. Hawthorn. I am called Forrester."

Jack blushed and apologised. He was so much concerned with his stupid error that he did not associate the lady's name with our present enterprise; but I instantly recollected particulars of the "Toadstone" diamond's former possessor. It was a coincidence that anybody of this name should be travelling in our company to Barbados. I mentioned the point to Hawthorn afterwards, but he set no store upon it. In fact, from that day forward, I must confess that my friend began to change in a manner most unexpected. The cause, of

course, was sufficiently clear. His nature had found its complement at last. My unpractical, red-haired chum went the way of many men, and reached the tropics without a heart.

Three days before we reached Barbados, Hawthorn, after struggling without avail to keep his secret, made a clean breast of it to me, and I rallied him as became a gay bachelor.

"Tell me all about her, old man," I said. "Get up on my bunk, and I'll send for some whisky and ice, and hear the whole yarn through."

He told me the facts, slowly, as though he were mentioning details in some case with which he was occupied.

"She 's twenty-five, and alone in the world. She 's going to Barbados as English governess to a Creole family there. She is wonderfully well educated, and as poor as a church mouse, and has a grand voice—and—and isn't engaged."

"The last the most interesting point about her—eh, Jack?"

"West, my boy, I'm beat. She's rolled me over like a ninepin—such an iceberg as I am, too! There's a fate in it. These things don't happen by chance. And what's more, I believe she's heir to the 'Toadstone'! She had a great-grandfather, or something of that sort, out here fifty years ago. She mentioned this great-grandfather quite casually; of course she did not know anything about our errand then."

"Then where does my seven thousand five hundred pounds come in, Jack?"

"Rainbow gold, old chap. Don't think I'm any more sanguine now of really finding the diamond than I was when we started; but, if we do find it, it's Miss Forrester's: that's quite clear to me."

"You've told her about it since, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact, I have."

I laughed.

"Well, Jack, I wish you luck, both with the lady and the gem. I only hope your outlook in the first case is better than the promise of the second. As to me, don't think I'm very disappointed. I have not by any means regarded the 'Toadstone' as a certainty."

He shook hands and said I was a brick, and added that Miss Forrester was an angel. He confessed that he should ask her to marry him some time or other, and hoped she would come back from Barbados with him.

"Five hundred a year's not much, but it's better than nothing; besides, West, there ought to be possibilities about me in some direction. I'm a man who should find means to increase his income. I'd even work—if the worst came to the worst."

"Possibly you'll marry a girl with fifteen thousand pounds, old man. That ought to turn your five hundred a year into a thousand, or something near it."

"Of course I don't know her view, but I

believe she does not hate me. She 's heard of me in the Cliffe case, and one or two others. I showed her our cryptogram. In fact, she 's got it now, with my explanation. To think a man can be such a fool—eh ? I know I 'm a fool, and I know everybody in the ship thinks I 'm a fool, and I don't care a straw, that 's the extraordinary thing ; I don't care. I wouldn't change places with the Saints in Heaven. This blessed love 's a riddle if you like, West. A boy with a bow and arrow, indeed ! Man alive, he 's a giant with a club ! "

Two days after this outburst, Jack Hawthorn's self-esteem suffered a rude shock ; and a circumstance occurred which was quite unparalleled in my friend's career. He had given Miss Forrester the cryptogram, and with it his elucidation of the puzzle. Then, one afternoon, when we three were sitting on deck, he suddenly asked her if she had been able to trace out the different stages in his explanation of Tretton Brodziac's enigma.

"I 'll get it," she said, without answering his question, and then left us, returning a moment later with the papers.

"Did you follow every step, Miss Forrester?" asked Jack, as she spread the papers out.

"Yes, Mr. Hawthorn, and with the most vivid interest. D 'you know—I hardly like to say such a thing—but I believe—I really do, that you have made a mistake!"

"I—a *mistake*, Miss Forrester?"

Jack started and blushed hot under his tanned skin. Then he laughed and threw away his cigar.

"Very likely I have," he said, with a change of voice. "Not the first either. Will you show me?"

"I only think," explained Miss Forrester, "and I don't know how I 've got the assurance even to think you may be wrong. See here, Mr. Hawthorn: the lines 31 and 41 in the second act and first scene of *As You Like It*.'

"What of them?"

"Well, why should they be so? The

man who wrote this puzzle turned everything backwards, didn't he? Then why should he have left these figures straightforward?"

Jack's troubled expression cleared, and he laughed.

"A very clever question; but don't you see, Miss Forrester, that he left the *other* figures straightforward also? That's what told me these figures should not be reversed. The year 1842 is just plain sailing, as he set it down. We cannot make anything out of the year 2481, can we?"

"But really, really, Mr. Hawthorn, these other figures are not as they should be. Something tells me that they are not. Suppose now you turn them about, just to humour a silly woman. Then for 31 and 41 you get 13 and 14; and there's ever so much more sense in those two lines than in the others. They seem almost to allude to the diamond itself—at least, I fancy so; and I'm very sure that *you* will be able to see the reference. Let me read them to you, or,

better still, read them to yourself. I 've written them down here."

She gave him a paper with a few words upon it; and I, looking over his shoulder, read as follows:—

"*As You Like It:* lines 13 and 14, Act II., Scene 1—

> 'Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
> Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.'"

Hawthorn looked at the paper without speaking for two full minutes, like a man in a dream; then he folded it up and put it in his pocket.

"I thank you," he said simply, turning to Miss Forrester. "Your wit has made mine look very blunt and dull. But never did you exercise it to better purpose. Give me time to reflect. There are great matters hid here. One thing at least is certain: we have now got the true solution of the cryptogram. I was stupidly, idiotically wrong."

"Do you think he refers to the name of the diamond, Mr. Hawthorn? It seems that

this is almost a sort of allusion to the 'Toadstone,'—at least, I ventured to read it so."

"On the surface it would thus appear," he answered. "You must give me time—ample time—and you must help me. The lost diamond is certainly alluded to: I am sure of that; but whether——"

He stopped suddenly, picked up all the papers, and went off to his cabin, leaving the sentence unfinished. Miss Forrester was in some fear that she had annoyed him; but I set her mind at rest, amused her with stories of my strange friend's cleverness, and saw a light shine in her eyes as I narrated an anecdote or two illustrative of Jack's real good heart and many generous actions. She was attracted by him I could see, but as yet she did not know him. Had she been more familiar with him, she might have hesitated to correct or question any of his conclusions in the matter of a problem; but now she had done so, and Jack had taken his beating like

a lamb; which fact convinced me more than anything else—more even than his own words—of the deep feeling which was growing in his heart for Amy Forrester.

Hawthorn's subsequent actions were certainly extremely odd. He abandoned his lazy shipboard existence, and spent considerable portions of his time in his own cabin alone. He wrestled with the new aspect of the riddle, and was practically invisible until a few hours before we reached Barbados. Then, as I stood on deck some four hours after midnight, and watched the tropical moonlight wane before the first faint gleams of morning; as I noted the stars fade, and the Southern Cross slowly die upon the horizon, Jack Hawthorn passed me, and, hanging over our starboard bulwarks, fixed his eyes on Barbados, where it lay black and shapeless upon the edge of the sea in the first glimmer of dawn.

"'Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.'"

He quoted aloud, looking at the island as he spoke; and truly Barbados itself—extended like a great humped reptile, with the brilliant crimson flame of South Point Lighthouse flashing on a promontory—made the simile apt enough.

"Well, old chap," I said, so close to his ear that Hawthorn started, "what d'you make of things now? Unto what end have your long vigils been leading? Does Tretton Brodziac's enigma grow clearer?"

"Brodziac was a very remarkable man," answered Jack. "If, as I think, I have got to the heart of his secret at last, he was a man of genius in his way, and has done a thing no man ever yet did before, or probably will again."

"Then you've really found out what he means, Jack?"

"Candidly, I think so; but I cannot be sure, and my conclusions, in any case, are so extraordinary that I must ask you to let me keep them to myself for the present."

"Even from me, old man?"

"Even from Miss Forrester, old chap."

I grew silent and reflective upon this. I was rapidly falling into the undignified position of a mere *tertium quid*, an individual of no particular importance or concern. I felt that I should be in the way before long. The situation rather tickled me, for I should certainly not have gone to the West Indies in summer time but for Hawthorn's handsome invitation.

"At least tell me if you are nearer a certainty than you were, Jack?"

"I can say this much, old chap, that if I am correct, the diamond is undoubtedly in Barbados—as surely as that red light there gleams over the sea, splashing and streaking the ocean with strange crimson snakes. And know this, too: Tretton Brodziac meant the man who read his riddle aright to have the 'Toadstone' diamond. For the rest we must be patient."

The usual bewildering scene greeted us at Barbados. Grinning negroes in lighters,

yelling negroes in boats, official negroes in launches, swarmed round the *Don* as she fired her cannon and brought up majestically in the sunny waters of Carlisle Bay.

Jack and I were finishing our hasty breakfast, and chatting to Amy Forrester before we all went ashore, when a tall, thin, cross-eyed man came aboard, and, stopping as he passed me, asked a steward if there was anybody called Miss Forrester in the ship. She answered for herself, and it then appeared that the newcomer was Mr. Benyon, the gentleman who had engaged her to be governess in his family. He was a sour-faced personage—a West Indian by birth, with more than a suspicion of the tar-brush about him.

Mr. Benyon said that he was in a great hurry, and spoke to our lady passenger with a sharp commanding sort of voice, which quickly made Hawthorn bristle up. Finally, Miss Forrester retired to prepare for going ashore, and when she had gone, Benyon turned to me, and said:

"Great responsibility, you know, giving a strange woman the charge of young people. What sort of a girl is she?"

"Not much good to you, or your children either. She's a lady," said Jack, scornfully.

"Sir!" exclaimed the stranger.

"I mean that if the rest of your family have your manners, Miss Forrester won't suit them; and they won't suit her."

"What's the matter with you, young man? Who's trod on your corn, eh? Mind your own business and keep your mouth shut, you impudent fellow!"

"As to that, it may be more my business than you suppose, Mr. Benyon. Remember you owe something to a delicately nurtured Englishwoman at any rate," answered Jack, who recovered his temper as soon as he saw Benyon's was gone.

"We Barbadians want no advice from you, sir," snapped back Mr. Benyon.

"No, sir, and you would not get it if you did," answered my friend. "You Barbadians,"

he continued, "want no advice from anybody —at least, so I have heard."

Mr. Benyon was gratified, and took the remark as a compliment.

"That's true," he said; "we can't stand you English with your 'side' and swagger."

Jack laughed.

"I'm surprised that we English can stand you. Perhaps it is the result of living in such a small place and thinking it such a big one; perhaps it may be the constant intercourse with mean, coloured folks and mongrels of every description; any way, I hear that your Barbadian is a poor, self-satisfied, conceited ass, as a rule; and so far as I've got yet I reckon they told me the truth."

The man trembled with anger at an assault so unprovoked, and I doubt not would have said much more; but at that moment Amy Forrester returned, and announced she was ready to go. We saw them rowed off—the pretty girl and her lean, cross-eyed employer. They danced away over the blue waters and

were quickly lost to sight, pulling shorewards in one of fifty boats, all with white sides and crimson cushions, all manned by tattered, ragged watermen of every shade, from ebony to putty-colour.

"I 'm going to see her on Sunday," said Hawthorn, watching the boat depart. "That brute lives at a place near the Crane Hotel, on the farther side of the island, and next Sunday I go over. By that time I hope I may have learned something. Anyway, I shall know whether it is worth while pursuing my Jack-o'-lantern diamond further. Let us go and pack and get ashore."

"Why did you pitch into that chap Benyon?" I asked. "Surely your object is to make friends here, not enemies. He may be useful to you."

"Hang him, the churl!" answered Jack. "I can work without his help, I hope."

And so we did, as shall appear; but we had to pay dearly for Jack's hasty and offensive criticism of Aaron Benyon. Presently Haw-

thorn's friend, Tranby, the man from whom he had received particulars before he left England, came over to the *Don* from another of the Royal Mail Company's steamships, then in harbour. He was a genial, good-natured fellow, and with him we soon set out for the shore. From the Careenage we went up to the Ice House, and were soon discussing our plan of campaign over a dish of fried flying-fish and a bottle of hock. Noisy, rainbow-coloured crowds filled the blazing white roads; the air was choking hot; the sensations of a first arrival in the tropics at this season of the year were far from entirely pleasant. But while Hawthorn and his friend talked, I strolled upon the balcony of the Ice House and soon forgot my head and aching eyes in wonder at the varied sights and scenes beneath me and around. The squealing mules, the negroes, the baby blacks—like chocolate dolls—the gay dresses, the chatter of laughter, the whining voices, the endless

processions of tattered negresses, each with a basket on her head, the policemen, the pigs—lean as greyhounds—the shrieking poultry, the buggies, the barrels of molasses, the green cane-tops, the pot-hatted merchants, the scamps and beggars, the sickly scent of fruit, the dust, the dazzle, the palms shooting between the silver-grey roofs, the light, and noise, and colour—all made a picture fascinating in its varied novelty, bewildering enough to a stranger, most difficult adequately to describe.

CHAPTER IV.

PETER PEGRAM.

JACK called me from the contemplation of the West Indian street, and told me that he already designed an excursion at sundown.

"Tom Tranby knows no more than he has told me by letter; but I reminded him of the old negro he mentioned when writing, and he has given me the man's address. I won't say I'm hopeful in that quarter, because it is generally suspected that Peter Pegram—the nigger's name—is senile, and too old to recollect any facts. But I deem the experiment very well worth making. There may be some light in his mind. I have often found that patience serves a man well with the aged. We shall see how much Peter knows—or how little. Observe, by the way, that his name is not Jaques. What a hopeless fool I was!"

"Meanwhile, let us take a buggy, Jack, and follow our traps to the hotel."

After a nap behind closed jalousies, I found myself better and, in the cool of the evening, strolled out with Hawthorn through the bright streets, where moonlight and gaslight strove for mastery, away, as directed, to a row of small cottages some distance outside Bridgetown. Through the hushed night we went under a great avenue of palms, in whose branches little tree-frogs chirruped. Then we found Pegram's dwelling, beside a calabash tree on which hung great green globes, streaked with silver by the moon. A cat was yelling somewhere behind the thatch-covered building. A light shone in the cottage window beneath, and we heard a negress singing with the plaintive whine of her kind. She stopped when we knocked, and opened the door, starting with some wonder to see two white men at so late an hour.

"Does Mr. Pegram live here?" asked Jack.

"He do; Marse Pegram my gran'fadder,

sar; an' he lib har—a berry ole, good nigger, gem'men."

"So we are told. We 've come to see him. And what 's your name?"

"I 'se Lily Pegram, sar."

"Well, Lily, please tell your grandfather that two gentlemen have come all the way from England just to see him, will you?"

"My Gard! from Inglan'!" She turned, and we heard her talking rapidly, while an old man's quavering voice made answer.

Peter was delighted to see us. He proved far from senile, being, indeed, a highly intelligent negro, though very venerable. His wool was nearly white, and a black, bald head shone through it. His face was all furrowed with Time's scars and seams, but his brown eyes twinkled as brightly as stars. He fussed to a cupboard as we entered, and from it brought an old blue coat with brass buttons. This he struggled into, and then, turning, begged us to be seated, and asked us what we wanted.

"Well, Peter, the truth is you're the oldest and cleverest man in Barbados—everybody says so; and therefore I've come to you for some special information," began Jack.

"I'se mighty ole, sar, an' de Lord him make me mighty clebber, too. So I tell you all I know 'bout fings," answered Peter very graciously.

"I'm sure you will. I ask no more. Now, Peter, take your mind back a bit. D'you remember somebody called Tretton Brodziac?"

"'Member Marse Bodzac? Yes, sar, nebber not 'member him. Him awful bad wickedest gem'man ebber come to 'bados. Him——"

"Now, Peter, hold on. He stole a diamond, didn't he?"

"Him tief ebb'ryting him put his claws on. Him bad wickedest tief ebber was. But him die drefful bloody def, sar. Him wicked clebber brains, dey blow out all ober de floor;

and me see dem all blow out, and Marse Bodzac all dead."

"Were you there when they found him, Peter?"

"Dat so, sar. I was one ob Massa Gobie's men; an' I break down de locked door and rush in wid de udders; but dey dat rushed in am all dead an' gone now 'cept Peter."

"Well, Peter, tell me all about it. Brodziac stole the diamond and went to his own house. Then the loss was discovered, and the house surrounded before he could get off—eh?"

"No, sar, nuffing ob de kind sort at all. Marse Bodzac him just lib at him white house, by whar de Crane Hotel stand on de cliffs now; and dar he lib all alone so long dat folks say, 'Whar Marse Bodzac gone?' Den it come to pass dat Missy Fanny Forrester she lose her dimond stone, an' she berry close ole frien' wif Marse Bodzac, so she say, 'Oh my! dat Marse Bodzac hab my dimond stone!'"

"Just so, Peter."

"Den, 'cause meantime Bodzac he nowheres 'bout, she say him run wif de dimond stone; but he no run, sar. He lib quiet at home; an' den we knock down de door an' find Marse Bodzac all 'bout de floor, an' dead as dead."

"Who killed him, Peter?"

"Ah, massa, dat take great time to know an' say. Some gem'men dey fink Marse Bodzac kill hisself, 'cause he stole de dimond stone ob Missy Forrester; an' some dey say, 'No, anudder gem'man kill Marse Bodzac an' take de dimond stone away from him altogedder.'"

"I suppose they found the diamond, Peter?"

"No, sar, nebber foun' no dimond stone. But John an' Henry an' Rhoda—he, he, he!—dey look an' look an' poke 'bout, an' dey look in Marse Bodzac's 'tomach, too, 'cause dey fought dat Marse might hab eat de dimond stone up 'fore he blew him brains away."

"There was a curious document found, Peter?"

"Dey say de debbil write him. Massa Gobie took dat."

"Then they decided that he must have killed himself, I suppose?"

"Dey did, sar. Dey said dat he 'd been so awful bad dat de debbil couldn't wait no longer for Marse Bodzac, and put de fing in his brain to shoot himself; but some said dat he was killed—murdered for all dat—by anudder gem'man, 'cause whar was de dimond stone?"

"Now, Peter, I want to ask you two very important questions: what became of Tretton Brodziac's house?"

"Him pull down, sar."

"And what became of Tretton Brodziac's body?"

"Awful terr'ble fing done wid dat, sar."

"What?"

I noticed that Hawthorn was deeply interested at this point. The answer to his last question was evidently all-important in his estimation.

"Why," replied Peter Pegram, "when Massa Gobie decide dat Bodzac kill himself, den dey take him out an' no gib him comfable grabe in de buryin' groun', but jus' dig a hole in de ole cross-road, and put Marse Bodzac in, an' hammer big stick frough him 'tomach, an' bury him dar. 'Twas Marse Benyon what done dat—de fadder of de Marse Benyon who lib out dar now. An' he say dey bury gem'men what kill darselves dat way in Inglan'."

"Brodziac was buried at a cross-road, with a stake through him—just so. You make it very plain, Peter—I wish I had a memory like yours. And now, where was it they buried him, eh?"

"I 'se not 'sackly clear on dat, sar. 'Cause de ole cross-road gone now an' new roads ebberywhars. But de place was out by whar de Crane Hotel him stand—near by whar Massa Benyon's house am."

"Thank you, Peter, thank you very much indeed," said Hawthorn. He gave the old man half-a-sovereign, and Peter lifted up his

voice and blessed us heartily. He promised to ransack his memory and let us know if anything further occurred to him; and we undertook to see the old man once more before we left the island.

"What 's your next move?" I asked Jack as we returned to our hotel.

"The next will be to find some old maps or registers, if such exist. We must see what Barbados looked like fifty years ago, and find the place where they buried Brodziac."

"Surely it cannot much matter where he lies, poor wretch? If his house is pulled down, it seems to me the game is up. The 'Toadstone' was hidden there, if anywhere."

"Brodziac certainly hid the diamond, but not in his house, I think."

"Nor in his grave, I should imagine. I can hardly suppose that Brodziac thought the old barbarous English custom of burying a suicide at cross-roads with a stake through him would be carried out in his case. Probably he had never heard of such an idea."

"I declare to you," repeated Hawthorn, "that Brodziac has hidden the diamond; and the cryptogram, taken from the room where his dead body was found, tells me where he hid it. Here is the hotel. We will go to bed and sleep upon the knowledge acquired to-night. I wonder, West, how Miss Forrester prospers?"

CHAPTER V.

AARON BENYON'S GARDEN.

HAWTHORN found less difficulty than he expected with the old maps, for his Barbadian friend, Tom Tranby, was in a Government office, and had access to many manuscripts and documents containing the earlier history of the island. Amongst these was just the thing that Jack wanted: an old military drawing of Barbados, dated 1840. The roads were fairly accurately marked; and seeing what great intelligence had already been displayed by the negro, Pegram, we felt sanguine that his memory, refreshed by the map, would be equal to recalling the identical cross-roads at which Brodziac's body had been buried.

Peter greeted us with much pleasure on the following evening, adjusted his horn-rimmed spectacles, and studied the drawing with keen

interest. At intervals he gave vent to a gasp or a chuckle, as long-forgotten spots, now known by different names, met his glance; and Hawthorn made no attempt to hurry him, rather choosing to let the ancient man's memory work its way through the scenes of his younger days.

"Lord! Dar's Tim Tinkler's plantation! Dat's all ober now; an' dar's de Windmill Plantation, whar I worked, an' my son what dead work, an' my brudder what dead work too. Dar's Green-Land, sure 'nuff; dar's where de Crane Hotel stand ober de white beach an' de cocoa-nut palms under de cliff, an' dar—dar, gem'men—dat's 'Lightning Flat,' whar de hurricane tore up de roots ob de land an' flicked de palm-tree heads away to sea an' left de stumps. Yes, dat's whar Marse Bodzac had him house, an' dat's whar Marse Bodzac had him grabe, sars—dat's whar him lies."

Peter put his black finger on a cross-road clearly marked in the old map.

"Does this road exist now, Peter?" asked Hawthorn.

"Dat road all gone, sar. All gone, all under sugar-cane now, I finks. But dar he was, an' dat 's whar Marse Bodzac am."

Soon afterwards we left the invaluable Peter, and having carefully marked a spot on the map indicated by him, returned to our temporary quarters once more.

"I am anxious, and I confess it," said Hawthorn. "We are going on too fast. Things begun thus easily often get an ugly check at a critical moment. In two days we have actually put ourselves in possession of knowledge that may lead to Brodziac's grave direct. But where shall we find it? And will access to it be granted, think you, if we do find it?"

"Of course, man. Surely nobody would much mind your digging the poor devil up; but a good many people will wonder why you wish to do so, and I am one of them," I answered.

"You are doubtful, West?"

"Well, Jack, perhaps I am. What good can dead bones do? You're not a prophet or a wizard. You can't hypnotise the remains of this rascal, and make his teeth chatter out his secret; you cannot ask him for the key of his riddle now."

"He has already given me the key. Wait a while, my friend. Have a little patience. I know my theory is strange, and my hopes must sound awfully vague. But wait just a day or two more. That is all I ask."

Next morning the merry Tranby, glad of an excuse, made holiday, and accompanied us to the southern shore of Barbados. But he acted in another and more useful capacity than that of guide. He understood surveying, and promised, with the help of his local knowledge, to find the much-desired spot where the old roads must have crossed.

"From the look of the map," he said, "I guess that place will be somewhere near Aaron Benyon's property. If it falls within his boundaries, I'm sorry for you, because he's

a squinting, cross-grained brute as any in Barbados. You know there 's only a sheet of brown paper between 'Bim' and the infernal regions; and Benyon will certainly see you on the other side of it or back in England again before he lets you make a search in his land; but we 'll hope for the best. I 've compared this map with another drawn to nearly similar scale, and I think the spot may just escape Benyon's, and lie outside in the sugar-cane plantations of the Bellfield Company. Any way, we 'll go and see, and lunch at the 'Crane' and have a good time."

We started in a buggy, and trotted steadily along through a sun-baked, scorched world full of light and colour. Grateful, indeed, to our aching eyes were the fields of emerald-green cane-tops which extended on either side of our path as we entered the open country. The billowy land rose and sank around us. The plantations were dotted with gaunt factories or windmills: here and there a palm broke the skyline; sometimes we found our-

selves in a brief tract of welcome shade as our stout nag and black charioteer brought the buggy beneath a clump of mahogany or mango trees. Frangipani glimmered with its starry flowers on naked boughs; even the lofty telephone poles which stood along the road were adorned with great bell-like flowers of ipomœa or other creeping things; humming-birds darted from blossom to blossom; Barbadian blackbirds hopped about our path; butterflies, great and small, gemmed the hot, dancing air. Our road chiefly wound between wildernesses of sugar-cane, which bent about us in ripe, tawny tangles, or sprouted thin and strong for next year's crop. Cattle and negroes loitered by the way; once or twice a vehicle going to Bridgetown passed us, and the white or yellow occupants regarded us with a measure of interest through their black veils.

Then, by Tranby's advice, we proceeded to the hostelry called the "Crane," and lunched before continuing our labours.

After a good meal and many "lime squashes,"

for the day was terrifically hot, our engineering friend set to work, and very speedily proved his fears correct. The old roads crossed each other at a point some ten yards within a high stone wall.

"That's Benyon's place, sure enough," said Tranby, "and you may as well start for Bridgetown now. It's only wasting time asking any favour from him."

"Ten yards within—ten yards from this chalk mark we have made on the wall?" asked Hawthorn, not heeding our friend's discouraging remark.

"That's so, Jack. Hullo! By Jove, here's a new face, and a devilish pretty one!" exclaimed Tom Tranby all in a breath; and, looking round, we found the cause of this outburst of admiration. Walking towards us was Miss Forrester. An unmistakable West Indian boy and girl accompanied her, and they drew up with amazement when she stopped and spoke to us. It struck me her charges were old to want a governess, for the

boy looked nearly eighteen and the girl but little younger. Afterwards, however, we learned that their mental growth was far below their years. Indeed, it appeared the lad was little better than an idiot, for when Miss Forrester introduced him as Mr. William Benyon, he grinned and laughed and behaved like a young ploughboy or a negro.

"Oh, how pleasant! how unexpected!" said Jack's heroine, putting her hand in his and smiling happily. "Now I'm sure you've driven out in the glare and heat to see me, both of you; and I think it heroic and delightful of you both, I do, indeed. You must come into the garden."

It was exactly what Jack wanted, and in a fine turmoil of love and excitement he followed his enchantress, while Tranby and I marched behind with the Benyons. Tranby was rather disgusted to find himself so completely out in the cold; but I soon explained the position, and alluded to the nature of Jack's friendship with Amy Forrester.

The girl led us into a beautiful garden, studded with fine clumps of towering palm and bamboo. A white house with green jalousies stood at the end of a noble vista of custard-apple trees and palms. Turning to the right down another glade, we presently found a double awning spread and fastened between the trunks of three great mango trees standing in a triangle. Here, under the shade, at the margin of a little lake, in which grew the noble blue nymphæa and a "Victoria Regia," were arranged easy-chairs and rugs—an inviting oasis in the desert of that tropical afternoon. We were soon seated and chatting as though we had not seen Miss Forrester for a month. She dismissed the negro who stood without and pulled at the string of a punkah fluttering above us in the canvas roof of the awning, and then, as the Benyon boy and girl had gone up to the house, our friend was able to talk freely and without reserve.

"No, I couldn't stop," she said; "I could not live here. I must stay for a while till I

am in a position to return to England; but, apart from the fact that I find this climate very trying, I am here with a most offensive and ill-conditioned family. Mr. Benyon is really a horrid man, and seems to think a governess is a sort of slave to be treated like——"

She broke off here, and a flush on her fair face spoke more loudly than words. An answering colour woke in Jack's visage.

"Forgive me, Miss Forrester," he said. "Let me have just one word in private; then we will return here."

He rose and walked away into the garden with her. I knew well enough why he had gone. It was, indeed, the most public exhibition of love-making I ever heard of, though perhaps warranted by the circumstances. At any rate, when they came back, a quarter of an hour later, they were engaged. Neither of them actually said as much, but Tranby and I judged for ourselves.

We were just starting to view a certain spot, of infinite interest to Hawthorn—a spot where

two ancient roads formerly met at a place now all overgrown with dense shrubbery within Aaron Benyon's garden—when that gentleman himself appeared, looking thinner and more acid than ever.

He hurried down from the house, blocked our path, and took off his Panama hat with a gesture of mock politeness.

"We meet again then," he said to Jack. "May I ask to what I owe the honour of this visit?"

"The visit is made to Miss Forrester, Mr. Benyon," answered Hawthorn, with a great show of friendliness; "but I am happy to see you again, and to test the truth of the traveller who says that West Indian hospitality is universal in these islands."

"Travellers lie, sir. At any rate I am one who treats my fellow-man as he treats me. You cannot forget our recent interview. If you have completed your mission to Miss Forrester, I would suggest that you and your friends depart."

"Surely, Mr. Benyon, you will permit us to enjoy the beauties of your noble gardens?" I asked.

The man began to grow very angry, and turned to explode his rage on the most defenceless of our party.

"You must remember, Miss Forrester, that you are my paid servant in future—do you hear? You have no right to ask your friends into my grounds, and——"

"Your servant!" thundered out Hawthorn; "know this: Miss Forrester is——"

He stopped suddenly and controlled himself, with a great effort.

"Pardon me, Mr. Benyon," he continued with an altered voice; "you are right and I am wrong. You have reason on your side. We will go at once."

"I should do so," answered the West Indian. "My boarhounds are no respecters of persons, and would as soon fly at your throat as another's."

"You may spare your threats."

Jack turned, and a significant look passed between him and Amy Forrester. Then the lady, without another word, left us and walked quickly to the house; while Benyon stood still and watched our party as it quitted his premises and returned to the buggy.

"All I need say is this," explained Jack, as we drove back to Bridgetown, "we must act henceforth without studying friend Benyon's wishes, or his convenience. I was within an ace of knocking him down and bidding Miss Forrester accompany us and leave his home for good and all, but fortunately I held in. I have already arranged with her. We shall have a friend upon the spot. The matter should be easy enough. We must get over the wall one night and do a little digging. When our object is gained, the lady can resign her post and return with me to England. By the way, we are engaged, West. Congratulate me."

CHAPTER VI.

DRY BONES.

AT this stage in our adventure I must frankly confess that I had fears for my friend Hawthorn's wits. He matured a most extraordinary enterprise, and ordered future events in such a way that his actions thoroughly mystified me.

"Everything depends on our correctness with regard to the measurements," he explained to me, two days after the excursion to Aaron Benyon's garden. "I have all confidence in Tranby's calculations, and shall limit my search to an area of ten square feet at the spot he has indicated in Benyon's gardens. Of course, we must carry out these operations without that brute's permission, because he would never give it. But the

thing can be done in a single night. We three must dig: you, and Tranby, and I. I shall keep my intentions a secret from all others. One of us is pretty sure to hit on the stump of the stake that penetrated Brodziac's corpse. That found, the others can abandon their work and concentrate their forces at the right point."

"What in the name of fortune has this body-snatching to do with the 'Toadstone,' Jack?"

"I have already told you that I do not intend to answer your question yet, old man. Wait, and let me carry out my design. One thing, however, I will say: ultimate success, in my opinion, depends entirely on finding Brodziac's bones. If we cannot do that, we may as well give up the adventure. But we shall find them. I have a conviction that they lie where the map and Tranby's survey place them. I design to carry out our search during Friday night next. On the following Saturday evening the *Atrato* sails for England

about five o'clock. I think we have had enough of Barbados. We will return in the *Atrato*."

"And Miss Forrester?"

"I have already booked her passage home."

"Well, upon my soul, Jack, if I didn't know you, I should say that this climate had unsettled your intellect. Does the 'Toadstone' go home, too? Because——"

"I hope it may. I shall be very disappointed if it does not."

"And what are we going to do with the late Tretton Brodziac's remains if you find them?"

"Make them answer one little question, old chap."

Every preparation was elaborated for our excursion on Friday night, and Miss Forrester —duly apprised in a letter of the raid we designed—promised to watch within the house and keep a light in her window, which faced upon the garden. A single light was to indicate that the house slept and our opera-

tions were unsuspected, but two candles, burning one above the other, would denote alarm and immediate danger. Jack arranged these plans by letter as a precaution, although there was little fear of our nocturnal enterprise rousing the house. Miss Forrester had meanwhile given notice to her employer, and intended returning in the *Atrato* on the following Saturday.

The day of the strange task came quickly enough, and hiring a buggy we set out as before to the Crane Hotel. We took spades and picks with us, and Hawthorn gave me one of a pair of little revolvers which he had brought with him from England.

"I have never used these in my life," he said, "nor do I suppose we need expect occasion for so doing this evening; but Amy has written a nervous note saying that she finds Benyon lets his boarhounds have the run of the garden at night. It may be necessary to suppress them. At any rate the brutes must not suppress us."

Our plan was to scale the wall soon after dark, to labour there under Jack's direction, and then when his purpose, whatever that might be, was accomplished, to drive away immediately.

This scheme we afterwards modified, and, dismissing our driver on reaching the Crane Hotel, gave out that we should stop at the hostelry for the night.

"We can tramp back to Bridgetown," explained Tranby, "and so escape any publicity which might make things awkward if we had to bolt from Benyon's at the last minute."

I pass over the pleasant day at the "Crane" and reach an hour—midnight, or later, on Friday—which found Jack, Tranby and me standing under a wall of about five feet in height. We had our spades, and Jack in addition carried a black leather bag of a good size. From this he now brought a dark lantern, and, with the help of the circle of light shot out upon the wall by it, we soon found a

chalk mark, which told us our bearings. Once inside, Jack's first care was to arrange rough steps of piled earth so that we might be back in the road again instantly upon any alarm; then he took a yard measure and estimated the exact spot beneath which Tretton Brodziac's bones should be lying, if the map and survey spoke true. We quickly cleared the shrubs and undergrowth, and having stolen out to see a solitary candle burning in Miss Forrester's window, set to work, only using the light of the dark lantern if our spade or picks touched a doubtful object. Despite our care, we made more noise than was desirable, but the ground appeared pretty soft and we worked with great speed.

At the end of half an hour a phosphorescent gleam flashed under my pick, in a hole I had excavated of two feet deep, and, stooping down to make an examination, the lantern shone on rotting wood. A few strokes of the pick round it convinced me that in truth I had

struck upon the stake we were seeking, and I made known my discovery in a voice uncautiously loud. It was answered to my horror by a roar that made the ground shake, while at the same time a dark body suddenly shot out of the night and made for me. A bough fortunately caught the beast across the chest and held it back a second, or it must have been upon me before I had space to draw my revolver. Even as it was, a sudden horror at the grim sight of the great hound, dimly lit by the lantern, made my hand shake as I dragged out a weapon. But Jack was before me. He had seen all, and just as the dog got free and came on with a growl and a rush, Hawthorn raised his revolver and fired twice. Two little gleams leapt across the darkness, two sharp cracks echoed noisily in the night, and the boarhound tumbled over, all humped up in a bleeding, palpitating mass, at my feet. At the same moment we heard the baying of another dog, evidently far away

"The stake! the stake!" said Jack, approaching me. "They'll be on us now before we can look round. Quick! dig altogether down to the root of the stake!"

We lost no time, and fire shot from our picks and spades as they clashed together and rapidly laid bare the rotten wood.

"Careful, boys," shouted Jack, "we're reaching the end. Go light, or we may do harm to what I am seeking. Two can do the rest. Just see if Amy is flying the alarm signal, West."

I jumped out of the pit we had now dug, and went away twenty yards through the shrubbery out on the lawn before the house. The alarm signal was burning, sure enough. Two lights, one above the other, shone out above me, and I could see a dim figure apparently moving hurriedly behind them. I rushed back, and found Jack and Tranby busy baring some human bones at the bottom of the pit we had dug.

"All right," said Hawthorn, coolly; "keep

watch, old chap, and if they come this way let us know. I only want two minutes more. Never mind the poor devil's ribs, Tranby. Dig for his head, man; dig gingerly for his skull!"

I left them turning the earth hurriedly, and casting Brodziac's bones to the right and left. But I could give them little time, for a crowd was already issuing from Benyon's, and torches blazed, flashing long arms of light across the house, streaking the palms with fire, casting a lurid brilliance into the gloomy, night-hidden woods, dimming the moonlight in the open. The crowd, by unlucky accident, saw me on the skirt of the lawn, and were upon me in an instant, led by Benyon himself and another hulking dog.

"They're coming!" I shouted, and hastened back to my companions. Thereupon Tranby clambered from the pit instantly, but Jack stayed on; and, looking down, I could see that he was carefully unearthing a round,

brown object from the damp, whitish soil in which it had lain buried so long at one end of the grave.

"The bag, quick!" he cried to me; then to my amazement he dragged the dead robber's head from its body with two blows of a spade, and, picking up the skull, put it hastily into the bag which I had handed him. After that Hawthorn extinguished the lantern and clambered out of the pit. He was only just in time, for a big negro had outrun his party, and now laid heavy hands on him as he crawled from Brodziac's grave, bag in hand. But the negro had not seen me under the darkness, and the next moment, with a yell, poor quashee went headlong, and measured his bruised length by the bones below. Jack at the same moment stopped the dog with a revolver bullet, and a second later we had all three tumbled over the wall, crossed the road that ran outside, and found safe hiding in a dense cane-brake beyond. With the help of a compass, we presently worked our way out

upon the eastern borders of the plantation, and from there our lawless party retraced its steps, reaching Bridgetown without further adventure, in the first grey of dawn, after a long tramp.

CHAPTER VII.

DRY BONES SPEAK.

I CANNOT say whether Benyon knew that he had to thank us for his nocturnal disturbance and the death of his two boarhounds, but certain it is that he made no attempt to arrest our departure, or that of Amy Forrester. On the following afternoon the *Atrato* sailed from Barbados, and, taking leave of Tranby, Jack, his lady-love, and I, all set our faces homewards.

No mention had been made of the "Toadstone" diamond to me, though I had reason to believe that Hawthorn allayed the curiosity of our friend Tom Tranby before leaving the West Indies, and I know that he also visited old Peter Pegram again in obedience to his promise. But, for me, Hawthorn's extraordinary revelation was reserved until after

dinner on Saturday night. Then, calling me into his cabin, he told me what remained to tell. The reader may have read Brodziac's secret, as my friend had already done; but I must confess that I never gleaned the truth until I marched into Jack's cabin as I have described.

He was sitting with Tretton Brodziac's skull before him, and the original cryptogram beside it. In a pill-box on the same table, reposing upon cotton-wool, I observed a small, brilliant object, which literally flashed fire and seemed to burn as brightly as the electric light set in the cabin wall above it.

"You 'll guess what that is, old man," said my friend, putting the pill-box into my hand.

"'The Toadstone!'"

"Right, and a marvellous gem, too. I never saw anything like it in my life."

"How in thunder did you get it after all, Jack? And where? This thing couldn't tell you where to look, surely," I said, putting my hand on the skull.

"It did. The dusty brains inside held the secret," said Hawthorn. "Look, West, look at this poor fragment; note that ugly hole behind the right ear; remember it was done with a pistol; and then read the cryptogram again, especially the quotation:—

> 'Which like the toad, ugly and venomous,
> Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.'

Why, my dear chap, there's almost pathos in those lines, read rightly. This poor wretch, this Tretton Brodziac, was himself the ugly and venomous toad. Ugly and poisonous indeed had been his history; and the jewel in his head was not his good brains, which had played the devil with him all his life, but literally and truly this precious stone."

"In his *head*?"

"Even there. *He blew out his brains with the 'Toadstone' diamond!* It made a pretty bullet. That is how I read his cryptogram, as Amy amended it, and I was right."

Jack said no more, but opened the skull

before me. He had sawn off the upper portion, and now showed me where the jewel had lain bedded in the bone—buried for fifty years in this strange hiding-place.

* * * *

As to the end of this story, it is purely conventional. Amy Forrester rather wanted to keep her diamond, but Jack said fifteen thousand pounds would be a far happier reminder of their trip to the West Indies; and I, being, as everybody knows, a practical man, agreed with him. Mr. Fielder succeeded in raising no little rivalry in the breasts of three famous collectors when the true history of the "Toadstone" came to be known; and, as a result, the famous gem was ultimately sold for no less than seventeen thousand pounds.

Of course I was Hawthorn's best man, and, of course, the wedded couple were the happiest pair that ever started on a honeymoon. Before he was married my friend

despatched a singular present to our acquaintance in the West Indies; and I have often wondered how Mr. Aaron Benyon explained the gift of two fine boarhound puppies which reached him about two months after the death of his own formidable beasts.

Jack, by the way, kept one memento of his visit to Barbados besides Miss Forrester. Perched on a bracket in his den there stands to-day the brown skull of Tretton Brodziac. And on winter nights, when the curtains are fast drawn, and firelight flickers here and there amidst Hawthorn's strange possessions, the skeleton head grins gleefully, and even winks at the man who fathomed its death secret.

THE END.

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